

# Democracies on the move

This book enquires into the state of health of contemporary democracies, offering a sociological reading of democracy to identify the causes of the current transformation of democracy from a social and cultural perspective. With attention to the social dynamics present in modern Western societies, it analyses phenomena such as populism, new conspiracy theories and denialism, and processes including de-politicisation and de-democratisation. Identifying the centrality of questions concerning social identity and the political imaginary to our understanding of such phenomena, *Democracies on the Move* explores the mechanisms that link the transformations of today's societies to the current phase of crisis in Western democracies. It will therefore appeal to scholars of social and political theory and political sociology.

**Andrea Millefiorini** is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Campania 'Luigi Vanvitelli', where he also teaches general sociology.

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### **Democracies on the move**

Contributions to a social theory of contemporary democracies

*Edited by Andrea Millefiorini*

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contemporary democracies

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First published 2025  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-032-66459-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-72253-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-72252-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781032722528

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# Presentation

*Andrea Millefiorini*

The conception of this volume stems from two sources, which came together to form a single body of ideas.

The first was the reflection generated from a paper I gave at the National Conference of the Political Sociology Section of the AIS (Italian Association of Sociology), at the University of Salerno, in October 2019. The paper concerned the present-day relevance of the concept of politics (specifically, in Max Weber) and, with some colleagues present at that conference who are now participating in the publication of the volume, the idea arose to continue that discourse by no longer solely declining it in terms of the topicality of the concept of politics but by extending it to the theme of politics in democracies and, in turn, of democracies in societies.

The second was provided by the proximity of approaches in the field of social theory that I have been sharing for some time with other colleagues who, from a perspective that is not directly ascribable to political sociology, have proved invaluable in further maturing and refining the idea, the path and the objective of this resulting group research work. In fact, the subtitle *Contributions to a Social Theory of Contemporary Democracy* is the best description of our path and our objective, which were finally finalised at a meeting of the entire group, held at the University of Campania 'Luigi Vanvitelli' in January 2020.

The subject of democracy is certainly not an easy one to propose. On a political, philosophical, legal, historical and even sociological-political level, the literature is so vast that there is a risk of repeating concepts that have already been well-covered, addressed and fully explored. However, it was not for this reason that we chose, as our preferred perspective, that of the social theory of democracy. The reason is driven above all by a common dissatisfaction with how the current debate, at least in the sociological sphere, struggles to pay due attention to a relationship whose relevance is increasingly more visible, namely that between democracy as a model, as a political system and its real foundation in societies. In other words, to investigate *whether and how* democracy finds its foundation not so much and not only in philosophical-political, historical, juridical, economic or cultural grounds but also in relation to the dynamics and organisation of contemporary societies, as they have come to be structured in our times.

Thus, a series of levels have emerged through which one can better observe the social foundations on which democracy rests, whether or not they are in good health, and whether or not democracy itself is therefore healthy.

A first level is more closely related to not only the principles but also the techniques, through which today's democracies function and their actual capacity to affect the real processes of society. The essays by Gaspare Nevola, Fabio de Nardis and Erica Antonini analyse the mechanisms of classical Schumpeterian 'competitive' democracy (Nevola); the current governance mechanisms, which have emerged in the wake of the welfare state crisis, not infrequently bearers of risks of de-politicisation and de-democratisation (de Nardis) and the repercussions, in terms of the quality of democracy, of the reduction of pluralism that has followed the weakening of political conflict and thus, as a consequence, the rise of populism in today's democracies, as well as possible remedies, if not to eliminate, at least to mitigate these consequences (Antonini).

A second level that emerged from our discussion, which is dealt with in this volume in two chapters, one by Massimo Pendenza and one by myself, is that of the relationship between democracy, freedom and social identity. Is democracy, understood as a system in which political actors act, able to respond to the growing need for identity present in hyper-complex, fragmented, individualised societies such as ours? As we know, one of the most recent achievements of contemporary democracies has been to strengthen the bond between leaders and voters. However, one has to wonder whether and to what extent the 'democracy of the public' (copyright Bernard Manin) really identifies with the leadership styles and models 'worn' by today's political leaders. Another aspect concerns the relationship between populism and identity. Can populism be considered a response to the, as yet, uncompleted answer to the need for identity? And again: after having been the instrument through which civil liberties and political freedoms were affirmed, are democratic states today up to the task of guaranteeing the full affirmation of social freedoms as well?

Finally, a third level that emerged in our group study was that of democratic imaginaries. The subject of the imaginary has come to the fore in sociology in recent years, and it inevitably also comes up in the socio-political sphere. In the sociology of cultural processes, the imaginary now possesses a value and relevance no less significant than that of more classical concepts such as values, symbols and social representations. The role played by imaginaries is that of contributing, thanks to their more marked elasticity and mobility, to the change of more established and 'rigid' factors such as values and, in the long term, institutions themselves. Hence also democratic institutions.

Building on pioneering studies such as those of Castoriadis (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*) and before that of Ortega y Gasset (*Man and People*), it is possible to carry out a useful transposition of the concept of the social imaginary in general to that of the political imaginary. And it is on this specific level that the last two contributions in this volume focus. Ambrogio Santambrogio proposes an explanation of the process of the substitution of social imaginaries for the old ideologies and how this transition has produced notable consequences in the processes

of the production of meaning and significance for the entire collectivity. Paul Blokker focuses specifically on imaginaries of democracy in contemporary societies, starting with post-war democracies, noting some important cause-effects such as juridification and alternative imaginaries of democracy as a political system.

In summary, the set of essays we propose attempts to offer some lines of analysis and reflection on the relationship between typical characteristics of contemporary societies and some of the most critical aspects of the democracies of the new millennium. An overall picture emerges from which it is possible to determine a number of aspects on which this volume offers the scientific community new opportunities for study and research.



**Part one**

**Democracy between the  
paradigm of crisis and  
paradigm of transformation**



# 1 Studying democracy from a sociological perspective

*Andrea Millefiorini*

## **Introduction: for a social theory of contemporary democracies**

The concept of democracy, which dates back to the end of the 6th century B.C. thanks to the Athenian experience established by the reform of Cleisthenes (508–507 B.C.), has been subject to study, in the course of Western history, by a variety of disciplines: we mention here only the main ones in this regard, namely philosophical, legal, historical, political, and, since the 19th century, also sociological. The latter was therefore the last, in chronological order, to enter into the study of democracy. Political science in fact did not originate in the 19th century but with Machiavelli, in the 16th century. It must also be said that sociology emerged, at the beginning of the 19th century, with intentions that were originally far removed from the direct study of political forms, let alone democracy, if we exclude the masterpiece of Alexis de Tocqueville, a sociologist whose work laid the basis for the study of the social foundations of democracy. He identified fundamental principles and features in the relationship between modern society and democracy that constitute, to this day, some of the original characteristics of contemporary democracies.

If Tocqueville's work, of which the nodal points of the sociological analysis of democracy we will shortly set out in brief, is universally considered to be among the most important in this regard, what, if any, are the other 'classics' of sociology, or other sociologists who, through their work, have made a significant contribution to exploring and bringing to light the most significant aspects in the relationship between democracy and modern, industrial society?

On closer inspection, if we consider the vast scholarly production on the most disparate themes and topics present in the history of sociological thought, that on democracy has been a subject that, among sociologists, has encountered – at least at the level of universally recognised fame on this specific aspect – a fairly limited number of names. We need not consider here the specific studies on political or cultural domains present in democratic contexts, such as research on political movements, political cultures, political socialisation, and patterns and options of electoral behaviour. Rather, we are interested here in who has provided and how they have reached sound explanations that clarify how the fundamental characteristics and principles of the *democracies of the moderns* find their constitutive reasons in the characteristics of industrial *modern societies*. In other words, whether links

exist between modern society and democracy not only in legal and political terms, which we know well, but also in social terms. This, in fact, should go without saying, in the sense that, even intuitively, the political and legal facts and characteristics of a democracy are nothing other than the pre-existing, socially matured consequences of a certain type of collective organisation. Although intuitive and common sense, this concept, strange as it may seem, has not, to date, been formulated and systematised theoretically by sociology in significant quantity and number.

This means investigating whether, for example, a certain type of social stratification can contribute more to the process of democratisation than another type of stratification. Or how a certain model of economic and social development produces masses to be integrated into the state and the market, and whether and how this process is manageable and governable by a democracy. Or how a degree of greater or lesser social integration is prodromal to a process of democratisation as opposed to, for example, the establishment of different, more centralised, or more autocratic political forms.

All this could be summarised in the question of how the progressive complexification and social differentiation, typical of both first and second modernity, are compatible with a greater or lesser degree of democratisation. Here there are two possible interpretative polarities: the increase in complexity – with its consequences in terms of crisis, collective recognition, and trust – may favour a weakening of adherence to the democratic form on the part of citizens, or, conversely, it is precisely the progressive specification and division of the overall functions present in a hyper-developed society that calls for a broad representation and recognition of the diversities present in models characterised by the ‘polytheism of values’ of Weberian memory. The focal point, the main problem of the relationship between modern society and democracy, lies, in the writer’s opinion, precisely on this aspect. A question that has not yet been definitively resolved, although, compared to the most critical periods that have traversed the history of democratic forms, we can say that we have hopefully left behind the most tragic moments that arose from this unresolved question. And yet, democracies are still by no means safe, nor will they ever be. And here we come to another essential aspect concerning the tie between democracy and its social foundations. Just as Ernest Renan, in, defined the nation as ‘a daily plebiscite’ (Renan, 1882), we could say that the French philosopher’s observation applies perhaps today to the category of democracy before and even more than to that of nation. Of course, it could be argued that in reality all political forms, all the different forms of government and political regiments, cannot but rest on a basis of legitimation and therefore consensus. However, in the case of democracy, this condition appears even more pressing, since democracy has fewer powerful instruments, compared to other regimes, to be able to force or manipulate consensus towards itself. Consensus towards democracy is generally either spontaneous or it is not. This is not to say that democracies do not also have instruments of cultural influence and conditioning to direct consensus towards themselves. However, it is not essentially in this way that they succeed in founding their social legitimacy: the latter generally derives from a long,



consolidated collective memory, punctuated by historical facts, by collective experiences handed down, and by political and social events that have contributed over time to making citizens aware of the value of democratic institutions. Rather than on mobilisation or persuasion, therefore, consensus in democracies is based on a long political socialisation, handed down through generations and thus directly by citizens *among themselves*, rather than by the intervention, which is not lacking, of representatives of institutions. Or rather, those representatives and institutions would have less capacity to exert influence on citizens if they did not have behind them a democratic political culture widespread among the population, the roots of which lie in a past containing the characteristics we have just briefly described. Therein lies the real strength of the social foundations of democracy compared to other political forms.

However, let us ask ourselves a question: what happens if for a very long period of time, say two or three generations, a democracy does not experience crucial passages in which it is called upon to defend, to emphasise, or to renew its reason for existing? Is that collective memory, which we mentioned above, able to maintain and express the same meaning and significance that it held for previous generations, who had received a living memory of it from the facts and events told to them by their parents, grandparents, friends, and fellow citizens?

If we consider the fact that democracies are currently experiencing a worldwide phase of regression, both quantitatively – that is, in terms of the number of countries adopting this political form – and qualitatively – that is, in terms of the quality of the level of democracy in the very countries where it is nonetheless present – we will understand how the question we have just posed, the problem of a democracy without a collective memory, risks contributing to the erosion of the social foundations on which a democracy is founded.

Is the adherence to democratic culture on the part of citizens and public opinion subject to forms of decline due, among other causes, to a weakening of the value recognised for this political form, following the orderly succession of generations that inherit increasingly faded, if not dissolved, memories of the periods in which democracies historically found themselves called to fight against external enemies or were dismantled by regimes that crushed their legal, political, and social achievements?

This is, in our opinion, a question worth trying to answer.

- 1) Is the political form of democracy linked or not, in the long run, to the processes of development and social complexification typical of modern, industrial societies?
- 2) Can the social foundations of democracy be separated or not from a political socialisation in which the collective memory of this political form does not remain firm and present with the succession of generations?

To answer above the two questions, which we summarised here for the sake of clarity, it is necessary first to take a step back, as it may be useful, to review briefly some of the fundamental contributions to the study of democracy from a

sociological perspective made by authors who go by the names of Alexis de Tocqueville, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Thomas H. Marshall, Talcott Parsons, Barrington Moore Jr., Stein Rokkan, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Charles Tilly. Having made this excursus, we will then have to ask ourselves which of the aspects brought to light by these authors can still constitute useful keys for interpreting and reading contemporary democracies and, subsequently, ask ourselves what, on the other hand, are those critical areas of our democracies today that the classics of political sociology had not intercepted because they were not yet present or perhaps, better still, not yet as evident as they are today.

## **Society and democracy in the classics of sociological thought**

### ***The individual, individualisation, and democracy: Alexis de Tocqueville***

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, as is well known, is a work that touches on aspects that are not only purely sociological but also political, legal, historical, and geographical. For what interests us here with regard to the questions posed in the first paragraph, we will briefly set out the contents of the French sociologist's work in the second book, in Chapter IX, 'The Principal Causes Contributing to the Preservation of the American Democracy', and in the second part of the third book, from Chapters I to VIII inclusive, in which the author deals with the themes of equality, individualism, and the question of the presence of a strong and deep-rooted civil society in American democratic societies. In these parts of Tocqueville's work, we find, in fact, some reasons that are still valid today for explaining the premises and consequences of the democratic political form in its relation to the forms of modernity.

One of the central themes that emerges from the pages of *Democracy in America* is that which highlights the passion for economic and material goods in the population and how prosperity makes a contribution to the fostering and the stabilising of democratic governments. "The passions that move Americans most deeply are commercial *rather than political*, or, perhaps it would be better to say that Americans take habits formed in trade and carry them over into the world of politics".<sup>1</sup>

Now, in the light of the history we have witnessed and are witnessing up to the present day, no one can doubt this statement by Tocqueville, not only with regard to Americans, but in general for all peoples: people's first and strongest preference is not at all for one form or another of political regime, be it autocratic, democratic, oligarchic, or otherwise, but to see their living conditions improved, beginning with their economic and material conditions, or seeing them maintained and guaranteed.

Since democracies favour trade, and trade favours welfare, one of the fundamental principles of Tocquevillian democratic theory is that welfare favours and stabilises democratic governments. Here, however, an important clarification is needed: it is true that there is a clear link between economic development and democracy (Lipset, 1960), but economic development is not a sufficient condition for the affirmation of democracy, nor for its stabilisation. Consider, in the first case,

China in the age of globalisation, in which strong and sudden economic development did not lead to democracy at all, and, in the second case, regimes that were already democratic and developed but collapsed under the weight of political crises, such as fascist Italy in the 1920s or Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

We can therefore conclude that trade and economic development constitute factors that may be predictors of democracy, but not elements of certain affirmation of democracy. The real point probably lies in the fact that economic development does not always produce, or is produced by, a bourgeois class that claims autonomy from political power. Where the development of trade is not accompanied by this essential condition, the preconditions for the affirmation of democratic sentiments in the population will be weak and uncertain, and the economic development, although present, will not be accompanied by an equally robust development of democratic forms.

A second, fundamental point touched upon by Tocqueville, of which the relevance and topicality we can still see today even in our democracies, is the close connection between individualism and equality that characterises the parable of the historical affirmation of democracies. Individualism and the process of individualisation are not exactly the same thing. In the case in question, moreover, the concept of individualism interests us as ‘political individualism’, that is, that strand of the history of political thought and action that understands political forms and forms of government as being called upon to affirm individual rights so that the individual may express and realise their autonomy and self-determination in full freedom. The process of individualisation can be defined, in sociological terms, as that long-standing historical phenomenon whereby the subject tends progressively to free himself from the constraints of traditional social ties and the rigidity of social norms and sanctions. It is partly related to that of political individualism, partly not: where we have political individualism, the process of individualisation also always appears; however, the latter can also be a consequence of conditions of economic development not yet accompanied by the same conditions of democratic political development (political individualism). And here the case of China is once again instructive in this regard.

Returning to the pages of the Tocquevillian text, the author insists on the close connection between individualism (which in the present case he considers in terms of both ‘political individualism’ and the ‘process of individualisation’) and equality. “The Anglo-Americans brought equality of conditions to the New World. Never were there either commoners or nobles; prejudices of birth there have always been as unknown as prejudices of profession”. In democracies, equality and individualism are mutually supportive and self-supporting thanks to the particular political and economic temperament they are able to deploy in society. “Equality suggests to the human mind several ideas which would not have originated from any other source, and modifies almost all those previously entertained”. Among these ideas are those of autonomy and self-determination, typical of modern individualism. Conversely, individualisation also contributes to maintaining the principles of equality, since individualism brings with it the concept, idea, and value of universal

rights, valid for all citizens. And the process never ends, as social, cultural, political, and economic conditions always generate new possible inequalities, perhaps previously unrecognised as such and now pointed out as injustices to be overcome. All this, outside a democratic context, would not be possible.

Finally, we come to how Tocqueville addresses the question of the steadfastness of democratic values and principles in the population. Here the theme of the relationship between democracy and collective memory is undoubtedly present in the French sociologist's thought: he explains how for Americans, unlike Europeans, having settled in the new world from a condition of men already civilised has not, let us say, 'soiled' their collective memory as democratic people.

The peoples of Europe started from the darkness of a barbarous condition, to advance towards the light of civilisation; their progress has been unequal; some of them have improved apace, whilst others have loitered in their course and some have stopped and are still sleeping upon the way.

Such has not been the case in the United States. The Anglo-Americans settled in a state of civilization, upon that territory which their descendants occupy; they had not to begin to learn, and it was sufficient for them *not to forget*.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, but how to do that? What does it take for a democracy to 'not forget'? This is a question on which Tocqueville stops; he does not go further, although, as we know, it would have been very useful to know his thinking for the purposes of the initial question posed.

In addition to collective memory, the steadfastness of democracy for the purpose of its legitimisation and internalisation, and thus for the purpose of the political socialisation of the population, can be ensured (and this is a classic and universally known Tocquevillian theme) by a strong and deep-rooted presence and tradition of associationism. "If men are to remain civilized, or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased".<sup>3</sup>

***The function of democracy in processes of social differentiation and integration: Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons***

The second 'classic' and one of the fathers of sociology who left us significant pages on the relationship between modernity and democracy was Herbert Spencer. As is well known, in his *Principles of Sociology* he deals extensively and in depth with the theme of political power and the forms it has taken in the course of the historical evolution of human civilisations.

Leaving aside the question and debate about the relevance or otherwise of the 'general law of evolution', the fact that most human societies have moved from a state of simple organisation to one of a more complex level seems an incontrovertible fact. It is one of the few points on which sociological theory assumes positions that are substantially shared by most of the different approaches that have gradually enriched its body of knowledge.

As societies tend to differentiate internally, and thus to complexify, political power, according to Spencer, plays, among other things, an important function in integrating the various parts that have become detached from the original uniform core of the simple society. In this process, forms of government experience increasing levels of centralisation of political power, but only until the emergence of industrial society. From then on, the need for centralisation of political power gradually gives way to a new and more sophisticated form of social integration performed by forms of government: decentralisation. Decentralisation guarantees the condition of voluntary cooperation that industrialisation replaces as a productive model, from the compulsory cooperation that had characterised pre-modern societies, which were highly militarised and hierarchised. This makes it possible to build and increase the capacity for self-determination and freedom of individuals, according to that process of individualisation – contextual and inseparable from the modernisation process – which we have already mentioned in connection with Tocqueville.

Spencer essentially associates the process of political decentralisation with that of democratisation. Less pervasive and violent forms of authority on the part of the state over people's activities and private lives, growing religious freedom, and the growth of freedom of trade and commerce are both cause and consequence of the growth of individualism. This form of social organisation finds in democracy the best and most rational mode of expression as the representation of multiple and complementary interests consolidated in the form of productive activities and guarantees their fulfilment while maintaining and guaranteeing possible further development and affirmation of individual freedoms, which are precisely the basis of the organisation itself.

Following his approach that metaphorically compares society to an organism, including both its biological and psychical aspects, Spencer thus comes to compare the parliamentary assembly to the 'conscience' of a society. The 'moral compass' of an individual corresponds, for a society, to the debate that takes place in its parliamentary chambers between the different parties that contribute to constituting the social, economic, and political life of the society as a whole. Probably the main limitation of the relationship between democracy and complex society in Spencer lies in the fact that he does not contemplate conflict as a central moment in the democratic dynamic. Or rather, for Spencer, conflict is a factor that arises exogenously to society. It only arises between one collectivity as a whole and another collectivity as a whole. Not *within* the collectivity itself (Millefiorini, 2013). Yet change in modern societies can also be effectively explained by the role played by conflict. The greatest political revolution in the transition from pre-modernity to modernity was precisely the fact that democratisation, by transforming the enemy to be annihilated into an adversary with whom to compete, made conflict, let us say, 'physiological' and even effective and positive for a society.

Also Émile Durkheim, in his sociological analysis of democracy and its connection to modernity, retraces much of the Spencerian path, albeit with some variations, and not insignificant ones. Democracy gradually asserts itself in human societies as it is contextual to the de-sacralisation of society and the state and thus allows citizens to participate in decisions that were previously reserved for castes,

elites, charismatic groups, or individual classes. In this, the Spencerian metaphor of representative assemblies constituting the *reflective consciousness* of a society is also found in Durkheim: “Deliberative assemblies become an increasingly general institution, because they are the organ through which societies reflect on themselves” (Durkheim, 1950, translation mine). However, he embraces a sociological concept of democracy that then transcends the individual parliamentary chamber and encompasses the entire complex of institutions that enable a democracy to function:

The closer the communication between the governmental consciousness and the rest of society becomes, the more this consciousness extends and includes more things, the more democratic society becomes. The notion of democracy is therefore defined by a maximum extension of this consciousness and, precisely for this reason, determines this communication.

(Durkheim, 1950, translation mine)

This process, the author states, has not only been underway for 40 or 50 years (so when he wrote, the second half of the 19th century): its growth ‘has been continuous since the beginning of history’. In this, we therefore recognise the evolutionary analogy with Spencerian thought mentioned above.

The fundamental characteristics of modern democracy are, for Durkheim, two: the first, already seen, is the progressively expanding ‘governmental consciousness’. But this requires another, fundamental characteristic of a democratic type of social order: “closer communication between this conscience and that of the mass of individual consciences” (Ivi, translation mine). And here the concept of the individual returns and comes into play, which gives Durkheim’s sociological thought all its originality and topicality in its reflection on modern democracy, since in the relationship between the individual, society, and democracy we can also see the most evident limits of the democracies of his and our times. The limit lies in the fact that between the individual, society, and the state those levels of mediation and control that in pre-modern societies guaranteed order, social stability, and the identification of the subject with its external social context are progressively being broken, shattered.

Everything, in practice as in theory, becomes a matter of discussion and division, everything falters. Society lacks a stable basis. There is no longer anything fixed. And because the critical spirit is so developed and everyone has their own way of thinking, confusion is increased by all this individual diversity. Hence the chaotic aspect that some democracies present, their continuous movement and instability.

(Ivi, translation mine)

As we can see, Durkheim was already talking in the 19th century about ‘disintermediation’ between the individual, society, and the state. However, during the 20th century, parties and ideologies succeeded, at least in part, in filling that

intermediation vacuum so lucidly feared by the Épinal sociologist. Today, in the 21st century, it seems instead that the void left by parties and ideologies is not filled, at least not to the same extent, by political subjects and actors fitted to that function and role. Hence the great perception of distrust and loss of authority of democratic models, both *within* democratic societies themselves and outside them, that is, seen through the eyes of political regimes that have every interest in opposing the democratic political form.

Finally, we can also place the work of Talcott Parsons within the evolutionary-functional framework – in the relationship between society and democracy – traced and defined by Spencer and Durkheim (Parsons, 1971; Mouzelis, 1993). In Parsons' concept of structural-functional differentiation, the democratic revolution was, is, and always will be a decisive moment, he explains. Parsons uses the expression 'revolution', and in this he sets himself up as a theorist who differs partially from his two predecessors, in that he posits the conflictual element as decisive – as we shall see, other authors not associated with the evolutionary or functionalist strand will also do – in order to maintain that indispensable association between social differentiation and democratisation (Parsons, 1971).

#### *The 'undesirable effects' of modernisation on democracy: Max Weber*

Max Weber's thought on modernity and democracy does not deviate, in its basic lines, from the substance of what is expressed by the authors discussed so far, although it is worth recalling a few points typical of his approach that provide a contribution to increasing and extending the explanatory range with which sociology has treated the relationship between democracy and society in the history of its thought.

As mentioned above, Weber confirms the association, or rather, the basic correlation between economic development, modernisation, and democratisation:

Without popular representation of the present type it would be to be expected that the economy would evolve towards a corporatist policy of assured subsistence, i.e. towards a stationary economy and towards the elimination of the economic interest in rationalisation.

(Weber, 1918, translation mine)

Within this basic framework, however, Weber famously emphasises certain tendencies implicit in the relationship between *mass society* (a typical passage of modernisation at his time) and democracy. Confirming what Durkheim had already explained about the inherent need of modern societies to increase the flow of communication between rulers and ruled, Weber nevertheless perceives the risks and consequences in terms of both the proper functioning of the state and the recruitment of a political class worthy of the name. In fact, in his view, the constant need for politicians and parties in general to address and gain the attention of the electorate puts modern democracies at constant risk of demagoguery (a concept, however, already well known in the history of political thought; just think of Aristotle or



Polybius, to mention the first and most important names that come to mind – a concept that therefore transcends the question of the relationship between modernity and democracy and which constitutes a factor that generally characterises *any* democracy, whether modern or pre-modern). There is, however, a second element in Weberian political theory that is truly innovative with respect to the previous reflection produced by philosophical-political thought on democracy. And it is an aspect pertinent to the modern society that Weber saw growing before his very eyes. It concerns, as is well known, the way in which political subjects operating in a democratic model – but also those to whom those policies are addressed, that is citizens – react to the constant pressure exerted by the process of bureaucratisation. Politicians and citizens, almost as an instinctive reaction or out of a desire for liberation from the waffle, slow pace, and inconclusiveness of the political technicalities typical of parliamentary form, devise plebiscitary and charismatic forms of consensus, capable, at least at first sight, of skipping the steps of formal democracy to which are added those produced by growing bureaucratisation (Ivi), giving rise, at best, to hybrid regimes between democracy and Caesarism, and at worst to authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

***Conflict, civil society, and democracy: Thomas Marshall, Barrington Moore Junior, and Stein Rokkan***

Less pessimistic and less sceptical than Weber about the possibilities and value of the democratic model, Thomas Marshall was a sociologist who made a fundamental contribution to understanding the relationship between modern society and democracy. He was the first to relate the link between modernisation, democratisation, and citizenship. Indeed, it can be said that the concept of *democratic citizenship*, from a sociological perspective, originated with Marshall. If until before him sociology had investigated, as we have seen, the links between social change, development, and democratisation, with the English sociologist, the study of democracy from a sociological point of view makes a decisive qualitative leap, in that the concept of democracy is inseparably linked to that of citizenship. Nor, on reflection, could it have been otherwise. Indeed, it is not possible to imagine a process of democratisation without it being strictly accompanied by an equally inexorable growth and expansion of individual rights, which, as we have seen with Tocqueville, stems from the process of individualisation that constitutes one of the fundamental thrusts of democratisation.

As is well known, the title of the work that consecrated Marshall among the classics of the sociological analysis of democracy is *Citizenship and Social Class*. This title could not have been more enlightening about the meaning and significance for the author of the process of democratisation in modern and industrial Western societies. We wrote above that it is by no means automatic that economic development must always be accompanied by a process of democratisation. It is often necessary for social conflicts to be triggered, which then translate into political conflicts. The latter *may* then succeed in asserting rights. These rights would indeed shape the framework of a democratic political form, but only at the end of a long



historical course. To this end, Marshall's work makes it clear that the emergence of such conflicts was made possible by the presence of well-defined and conscious social classes and the dialectic they generated in the political arena of the societies in which they fought. We could therefore say that if Marx was the theorist of the role of the social classes in the perspective of the historical affirmation of socialism, Marshall was instead the theorist of the role of the social classes in the perspective of the historical affirmation of democracy. Without a bourgeoisie that asserts its political power over that of traditional, monarchical, or feudal powers, no process of affirmation of rights will ever be possible, in any society and in any historical period, whether economic development is underway or not. All this Marx said and explained. What he did not say, and what Marshall explained instead, was that after the bourgeoisie, the working and labouring classes, at least those in the West, would pick up the baton not to overthrow but to broaden the framework of democratic citizenship rights, thus continuing the path opened up by the bourgeois class.

In the perspective we are examining, the merit of Barrington Moore Junior was that of having carried out an analysis, through the comparative socio-historical method, thanks to which he succeeded in revealing the relevance of the type of dynamics subsisting between the owners (dominants) and the peasant masses (dominated) in directing the course of history, in the different countries, either in the direction of dictatorships or in the direction of democracies, according to the well-known four possible paths: the combination of capitalism and democracy (England and France), of capitalism and high-bourgeois reaction (Germany and Japan), of dictatorship of the peasant masses (China), and finally the 'hybrid' case of India, a country in which there have been no real revolutions, neither on the bourgeois nor on the peasant side, and which therefore appears as a *sui generis* case, harbinger of interesting developments for the democratic political form that in any case, also by virtue of British inheritance, the country has taken since 1947. For this reason, the author rightly asks, "Will India be able to avoid the terrible costs of violent revolutions and discover a new one, or will it succumb to stagnation, whose costs are no less terrible"? (Moore, 1966). Considering that Moore's work dates back to 1966, we can now well say that the 'Indian road to democracy' constitutes a model in its own right, with its own physiognomy and identity, despite the enormous cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences within. It is a model that probably has much to teach the democratic political forms that arose in the wake of the bourgeois revolutions.

In Moore Junior's analysis, one aspect, if not decisive, but certainly very influential, is the particular relationship that was or was not established, within the ruling class camp, between the traditionally landed class and the rising productive bourgeoisie. Where the former, as in the English case, accepted some form of alliance, if not mimicry, with the bourgeoisie, the process of democratisation, once the absolutist monarchy came to an end, was far more gradual and, we can say, 'reformist' than, for example, in France, where the old landed class never agreed to compromise with the rising bourgeoisie, the consequence of which triggered a violent revolutionary process that had permanent effects on the politics and culture of that country.

In conclusion, Barrington Moore's work tells us as a whole

that the road to . . . democracy is not improvised but requires many decades of arduous construction. To believe that in Russia it could suddenly open up, as if it were a matter of embarking on a new stretch of motorway as soon as the ribbon had been cut, after seventy years of travelling on a road shaped in a totally different way, owes only to the short-sightedness of the theorists of this end of history.

(Gallino, 1998, translation mine)

And indeed, Gallino continues,

[T]he social classes possess an imperishable historical memory, even when they are unaware of it; and although it sometimes contributes to repetition of the same mistakes, under other conditions, it can contribute to initiating quite unpredictable forms of social and political action.

(Ivi, translation mine)

Stein Rokkan, continuing the sociological perspective that posits conflict as a central moment in the dynamic between society and democracy, a conflict that therefore contributes to the development of both, shifts and broadens the analysis from class conflict alone to a whole other series of possible social 'cleavages', potential generators of conflict. We recall them briefly here: capital-labour, city-countryside, centre-periphery, state-church (Rokkan, 1970). Rokkan's merit is twofold. Firstly, to have declined the dynamics of the conflict, which from social becomes political, not only in terms of class but also of other oppositions that may arise from time to time (these, unlike the former, not *always and however* but according to the historical contexts of the different countries). Secondly, his broadening, especially in comparison to Marshall, of the reading of the democratic political process resulting from the conflict, from the mere legal level of rights to that of the arrangements of the entire political system of a democratic society. Indeed, as is well known, the Rokkanian sociological reading of social conflict also leads to a political explanation of the formation of the party systems present in the various European democratic regimes that developed from the end of the 19th century to the 1970s. If in a parliament, for example, we have the presence of a large Christian-inspired party, this may mean that in that society we have witnessed, or are witnessing, the presence of a still unreconciled cleavage between secular culture and religious culture. If, on the other hand, there is a strong presence of autonomist or independence parties, this is undoubtedly the consequence of a rift still existing between the centre and the periphery.

***Classics in the study of the relationship between society and democracy in the 21st century: Eisenstadt and Tilly***

And so, we come to the two sociologists who, in possession of the same profile of authority and scientific recognition as their predecessors (they too use the

historical-sociological method) on the subject of the sociological theory of democracy, cross the 20th century and come up with significant explanations of democracies in the 21st: Shmuel Eisenstadt and Charles Tilly.

Eisenstadt is known for introducing the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ to explain the different processes through which different historical civilisations arrived at modernity. While not distancing himself from the previous classical readings of modernisation processes that we have looked at so far, he adds important elements that enrich the previous picture. There is in fact no ‘one’ modernity, typical of that original nucleus of countries from which it originated, but, after the first wave between the 18th and 19th centuries, others followed until the last one, the one that arose from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1991. That was when the so-called phase of ‘globalisation’ began, which has marked the last 30 years of our history and which, as emerges from Eisenstadt’s comparative-historical studies, has entailed the weakening of the hegemonic conceptions of a modernity inseparable from the nation-state or from the process of secularisation of collective identity that has developed in the West. Globalisation, which, thanks to the growth of market mechanisms that have invested countries and continents hitherto outside the engine of development, produced, up to a certain stage, a tendency to enlarge the perimeter of democratic countries, but within a dynamic and in a manner quite different from the classical ways with which the West had hitherto given rise to this type of political form. Since the early 2000s, however, there has been a tendency for democracies to move backwards, both in terms of the number of states that adopt their cardinal principles and fundamental orderings sufficiently and also in terms of the quality of institutional performance and participation in the oldest Western democracies themselves.

What are the reasons for this trend? Eisenstadt explains that they are to be sought, even before political or legal reasons, in the very social arrangements that have emerged as further and more recent consequences of that development and social differentiation that we have seen described so well by the classics of sociological thought. Today, compared to yesterday, differentiation also produces fragmentation, in the sense that while in the past the differentiated groups maintained their own internal identity – think of the classes, the family, and, in short, the classic Weberian typology of ‘class, status and party’ – in our day and age, on the other hand, occupational roles are increasingly distant from the Weberian categories now cited. Models are thus emerging that are constantly evolving and little oriented towards the central political structures of society, towards its centre (Eisenstadt, 1999), while the individual not only assumes an autonomy from social groups of reference but also, inevitably, assumes a greater vulnerability towards and conditionability from subjects and powers no longer ascribable to their immediate context of life, work, and social relations. There is thus a redefinition of the boundaries of collectivities: Eisenstadt speaks of the “growing dissociation of political centres from social and cultural collectivities” (Ivi). This is also at the root of the decline of class cultures, a standardisation of lifestyles and relations that, if on the one hand allows for a greater democratisation of customs, collective habits, and consumption, on the other hand possibly exposes the individual to conditioning by centres that cannot be traced back to political representativeness.

The problem of identity and identities, therefore, emerges forcefully in the scenario of the relationship between societies and democracies in the 21st century. If traditional political intermediaries are no longer able to guarantee integration and belonging, an identity vacuum opens up that contemporary societies and democracies do not yet seem to have been able to fill, except in precarious, contradictory terms, often counterproductive or damaging to themselves, as will be analysed in more detail in the course of this volume. All this, Eisenstadt points out, may lead in unforeseeable times to profound changes in the institutional foundations of democracies and may cause them to weaken or even undermine their resilience at the foundations.

In this vein, Charles Tilly speaks openly of de-democratisation (Tilly, 2007). De-democratisation is not a process already inscribed in things or in history. However, this is the sense of Tilly's sociological analysis of democracy: in contemporary societies (but also in societies of the past), de-democratisation occurs with no less frequency than democratisation. So much so that there are 'waves' of democratisation and 'waves' of de-democratisation. But what does Tilly mean by the terms 'democratisation' and 'de-democratisation'? He argues that a regime can be called democratic when the political relations between the state and its citizens exhibit broad, equal, protected, and mutually binding consultation, whereas de-democratisation involves an overall shift towards narrower, less equal, less protected, and less binding consultation (Ivi).

From a purely sociological point of view, one of the factors that most explains the first or second process is trust systems or, to use Tilly's expression more precisely, 'trust networks'. There is in fact a direct correlation between trust networks and democratisation. These networks may be constituted by associations, parties, and various actors of civil society, but they are also the result of the consolidation of the authority and efficiency of the state in protecting and guaranteeing citizenship rights: the relationship between state and citizen in short. After all, the reason why a company decides to go and invest capital in another country is also due to the fact that that company knows it can have *trust* both in the subjects of civil society with whom it will interact and in the state with which it will sign pacts or agreements for the investments it is about to make.

Tilly explains that thus democracies achieve the integration of trust networks into the political sphere (democratisation). Trust networks that were previously separate from the state (e.g., the ability of the feudal lord to secure goods and protection for his *clientes*) are progressively taken over by the state system. If the trust networks – the author continues – that citizens deploy in pursuit of their most relevant activities remain isolated from the political sphere, citizens have little incentive to take part in political life. Hence, such conditions of isolation make a systematic translation of the collective will expressed by citizens into state action (de-democratisation) almost impossible, which can be observed, for instance, in the phenomenon of growing electoral abstentionism in democratic systems.

Thanks to Eisenstadt and Tilly, we are thus able to observe that two of the most sociologically relevant aspects in the relationship between society and democracy are the identity factor and the trust factor (identity and trust), and that in the

democracies of the 21st century, we are witnessing a progressive decline in the presence of both of these two fundamental factors capable of maintaining and consolidating a democratic system in a modern society. The contribution of these two authors thus complements and enriches that of their predecessors and gives us an overall picture of the relationship between society and democracy that allows us, for now, at least, to answer the question, the title of this introductory chapter: why study democracy from a sociological perspective?

### **Perspectives and developing themes in the study of democracies from a sociological perspective**

In the light of what we have set out so far with the analysis of the main research of the classics of sociology on the subject of democracy, what aspects can be identified that, in order to understand *today's* democracies, stand out as factors that deserve further discussion, further investigation?

We have seen that the themes of identity and trust are certainly most present in the reflection of the classics, both the earlier and those closest to us. These aspects, however, hitherto observed and considered in their, shall we say, 'physiological' presence in the dynamics of the relationship between society and democracy, are beginning – at least in our opinion – to require greater attention on the part of sociological theory and research. Precisely because of the changes that have taken place in democratic societies, identity and trust no longer seem to be able to play the integrating role that, at least throughout the second half of the 20th century, they enjoyed in maintaining the legitimation and internalisation of the value of democracy among citizens. As Tilly explained, there have been waves of de-democratisation in the past, and just as in the past, today these waves are also characterised by distrust in democracy and a loss of its capacity to express models of political identification through democratic participation. Evidence of this is the fact that today it is precisely the 'democratic question', that is, the risks and problems associated with the deteriorating quality of democracy, that no longer holds priority either in the concerns of the political classes or, still less, in those of citizens and public opinion.

So it is on this last aspect that we seem to be able to conclude that the question posed in the first paragraph, namely in a long period of 'democratic peace' and thus a progressive loss of bite in common memory, of the decisive moments, even tragic and bloody ones, which contributed to the founding of the reasons and value of democratic freedoms in the history of a nation, as the generations succeed one another, the attenuation of this essential component could – this is obviously a theoretical hypothesis – have contributed to a sort of 'relaxation' with regard to the sense of belonging and identification with democracy.

Indeed, collective memory constitutes a founding aspect of the collective *identity* of a people and a nation. Hence the element of identity, whose importance we have emphasised with regard to the health of a democracy, seems today to be weakening in its relevant aspect of recognition with the past of one's own community, of the society to which one belongs. This inevitably also has repercussions

in the recognition of the value of the *institutions* of those same societies to which one belongs, which, in the case in question, are precisely democratic institutions.

This is not, of course, the only constituting factor in the crisis of contemporary democracies from a purely sociological perspective. Another aspect that, from the outset, we have seen to be a decisive element in the analysis of the fathers of political sociology on the subject of democracy, starting with Tocqueville, lies in the degree to which the individual is able to integrate himself into the civil society in which he operates, in which he works, and in which he lives his daily life. The more the fabric of the social, cultural, and civil life of a community is able to guarantee the individual motivations that are not exhausted in the mere performance of a materially and economically assigned role but also embrace other forms of fulfilment (the theme of social ties, associationism, and social capital), as we were saying, the more this dimension is present, the more the levels of trust circulating in society will be high, and the citizen will more likely also feel those civil and political institutions that this connective tissue is capable of guaranteeing and maintaining, *in specie* democratic ones (Putnam, 1993, 2003).

On the subject of social bonds, however, a question arises of no small importance in contemporary democracies: who is part of the *demos*? In other words, the issue of social inclusion is a factor that, on the one hand, makes it possible to maintain those levels of trust we have just mentioned, but which, on the other hand, raises questions that also involve the level of identity of a community and which inevitably often find an outlet in defensive reactions, if not outright exclusion, reactions that in turn contribute to lowering the overall level of trust in institutions. It would appear then that there is a point beyond which identity levels, if not sufficiently firm, risk undermining trust levels too. There would thus seem to be a positive correlation between identity and trust, but only up to a limit, beyond which, if identity becomes closed and defensive rather than open and inclusive, trust in democracy – which is by nature an open system – is undermined and diminished. Indeed, it is precisely on this fine ridge between identity and trust that much of the dynamics, physiological or pathological, of today's Western democracies are played out.

Populism, for example, when analysed from an exquisitely sociological perspective, also stems from the imbalance that has socially arisen between the two terms in question. A diminished capacity for collective recognition – recognition, however, not necessarily in the entire community, but in a group, in a class, in a political 'people' – resulting from the parcelling out and complexification of the economic and social organisation, has produced a feeling of aversion towards political classes formed in previous decades, on exactly the opposite basis, namely models of recognition of interests and values no longer applicable to new forms of identity and collective recognition, particularly to new generations.

Hence, from this perspective, it may be useful to reflect on how to restore sociological meaning to the institution of representation, a consensus to reconstruct not only on the perception, by the political elites, of contingent needs and interests but also on the mediation and synthesis of ideality and values, as well as on the conception of alternative projects of society, structured on the medium-long term,

rather than on the decisionism of a ‘culture of the present’, which is precisely that typical of populisms.

From this point of view, sociological analysis can help to read undercurrent demands, or those that have not yet emerged onto the surface, coming from social strata that still exist and differ from one another, given the progressive increase in the gap in the distribution of wealth and income, not least in the countries with the oldest democratic tradition. This unease is today expressed in more ‘emotional’ than political or cultural terms. Well, one of the tasks of social theory should be precisely that of interpreting these demands, these indicators of a profound unease and of legitimate claims.

If political struggle is in fact expressed, as it seems to have been up to now, predominantly of populist sway, political discourse does not allow us to clarify the real reasons that, from the bosom of society, pressurise and lead to protest, political alienation, or apathy. It is true, in fact, that some of the most authoritative experts in political culture also count among the causes of populism issues related to the widening economic gap (Kriesi, Pappas, 2015; Inglehart, Norris, 2016), yet *that* political (populist) discourse applied to *that* (economic) theme shows all its limitations and all its inability to define a realistic and politically expendable communicative framework from a strategic perspective, despite having a considerably large electorate. This was seen in Italy, with the 5-Star Movement; in Spain, with Podemos; in the United States, with Trump. The ‘rust belt’ of US cities, although impoverished and humiliated by the profound economic and industrial restructuring underway, did not gain a single extra dollar from the trust placed in the president who had promised to return those areas to their former glory. And so, over time, populist votes turn into sheer abstentionism (for now).

Conflict, therefore, which, as some of the classics of sociology have taught us, is the engine of social and political dialectics, today appears faded, or if we want, ‘adulterated’ by languages that do not allow its development based on clarity, recognisability, opposability, and polarisation. All this contributes to weakening political interest and participation and is therefore one – though certainly not the only – cause of so-called de-politicisation. In fact, when political discourse is incapable of arousing and stimulating the imaginative capacity in the voter, when it does not mobilise for the future and for others but passivises on the present and on oneself, it condemns itself to a short life and to a parabola destined to reach its descending phase in no time.

Moreover, concentrating the focus of the political agenda only on economic issues is in itself a factor that risks condemnation to de-politicisation. The economy engulfs politics and relegates it to a secondary role, thereby also emptying it of the meaning of democratic confrontation and dialectics.

If conflict and competition, when conducted in sober language, in a framework of respect and mutual recognition of the adversary, are beneficial to the relationship between society and democracy, inclusive policies are no less useful to the cause of restoring health to this relationship. Faced with the spread of neo-populisms as bearers of communicative rhetoric and logic tending towards the exclusion and



demonisation of the other, a sociological look at the issues of reconstructing the socio-political community in a more inclusive sense becomes relevant once again. And here we return to the question of the *demos*.

Today we are witnessing the so-called inflation of claims. Claims of rights of inclusion: of gender, of race, of ethnicity, of species. And yet, the risk is that rights are claimed only in relation to groups, sub-groups, categories, and sub-categories, and empty the social and individual identity within those groups, within a perspective of closure against the other, with the subsequent loss of that fundamental attribute of the universalism of the rights of all individuals, equal to each other, which has been the most important achievement of modern society. An important contribution can therefore be made by sociology in outlining a framework for the further advancement of rights, but in a perspective that maintains the value of universalism prevailing over that of particularism and hyper-specificity, of exclusion masquerading as inclusion, of intolerance presenting itself in the guise of a politically correct misunderstanding. Otherwise, the risk is that of a progressive slide from what has been the centuries-old construction of civil society, towards a formless hybrid, with traits of 'incivility' in the sense of denial of recognition not so much of groups or sectors, but of the person as such. And who knows whether in this way sociology might not also take a few steps forward in the old but still lively debate between formal and substantive democracy.

## Notes

- 1 Tocqueville, A. de, 1835–1840 *Democracy in America*, Book Two, Chapter IX (translation mine).
- 2 Tocqueville, A. de, 1835–1840 *Democracy in America*, Book Two, Chapter IX (translation mine).
- 3 Tocqueville, A. de, 1835–1840 *Democracy in America*, Book Two, Chapter IX (italics mine).

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## 2 The democratic fact

### Democracy, crisis, transformation

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#### Introduction

This contribution is inspired by a certain dissatisfaction with the way in which the dominant political culture and current social sciences deal with the subject of democracy, particularly with the success, ‘staying power’ or crisis of (liberal) democracy in the contemporary world. The historical junctures that form the backdrop of our argument are found in a number of salient moments between the 20th and 21st centuries:

- 1) in the aftermath of World War II, with the military and ideological defeat of early 20th-century fascisms;
- 2) at the turn of the 1960s and 1980s; firstly, at the time of the effervescence and demise of the 1968 protests (a dream or a nightmare, depending on one’s point of view); secondly, at the time of the Trilateral Commission’s ‘democratic manifesto’<sup>1</sup> and the associated diagnosis of the crisis of democracy due to the ‘overload of claims’ and the ‘ungovernability’ of democratic societies and regimes; thirdly, at the time of the neo-liberal revolution (counter-revolution or reaction) that from the United Kingdom and the United States gradually spread (politically, culturally, ideologically, economically) throughout Europe and the world;
- 3) the fall of the Berlin Wall and its season that sees the demise of *real socialism*, and also of *ideal socialism*, a season that sees diagnoses of democracy and its future ripen within the political, ideological and cultural framework of a ‘post-1989’, originally announced under the banner of the triumph of liberal democracy and the ‘end of history’;
- 4) to the times of democracy, which continues to keep the ‘name’ fixed while the ‘thing’ changes profoundly under the succession of emergencies, wars and crises of various kinds, which often overflow into ‘states of exception’, formally declared or not, welcomed or applauded by many in society. Against this backdrop, liberal-democratic societies, beset by ‘crisis as the dominant narrative’,<sup>2</sup> fall prey to fear and are not subtle about the requirements typically attributed to what they designate as democracy, while a ‘closed democracy’, a distant

relative not only of an ‘open society’ but also of a ‘post-democracy’, takes on an ever-increasing new shape: a ‘closed democracy’ that is not an offspring of the COVID-19 era.

The core of this essay’s argument can be succinctly formulated: the state of being, trends and developments of democracy (both in the present and in the past) are explained in the light of the dialectic between politicisation and de-politicisation, between ‘open democracy’ and ‘closed democracy’, and between ‘pro-system politics’ and ‘anti-system politics’. This dialectic constitutes what we can call the ‘democratic fact’, its historicity and its politicity. In order to explore this working hypothesis, we need to make explicit not only the postulates that guide the prevailing theory and analysis but also the prevailing political culture of democracy. On this basis, we will explore how and why the *paradigm of the crisis of democracy* tends to be deficient and distorting, both in explaining the conditions in which liberal democracy finds itself in our time and in explaining antagonistic phenomena such as neo-populisms. The theory of the ‘democratic fact’ and the postulate of ‘dual democracy’ on which it rests suggest the adoption of a *paradigm of the transformation of democracy*, attentive to the complex relationship between the ‘name’ and the ‘thing’ democracy.

### Democracy and crisis

The most recent stages that trace the course of today’s crisis of democracy mixed with democratic malaise and recession are well known and, on the whole, shared in the specialist literature. Below, we recall what seem to be the main ones.

- 1) The traumatic 11 September 2001 Islamist terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the subsequent waves of attacks in the Western world, which shake public opinion, daily life and security and intelligence systems, as well as the constitutional guarantees of liberal-democratic countries; the crisis of democracy under Islamic threat is associated not only with the fact that so many young Muslims (in and outside Western countries) but also ‘young Westerners’ are abandoning their routines of life and worldview to espouse Islamic culture or religion and even the jihadist cause, disavowing the ‘free world’;<sup>3</sup>
- 2) The financial crisis that exploded in 2007 in the United States and immediately spread to Europe, with strong economic and social consequences on employment, welfare and austerity policies; on the distribution of the costs of the recession and the increase in inequalities; on the frustration of middle-class expectations and on the distance between the ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ classes;
- 3) Greece’s public finances crisis, which brings an EU member country to the brink of ‘state bankruptcy’. This crisis in 2015 will in turn trigger a severe social crisis in Greece and a bitter political conflict within the EU itself between the democratic government of Tsipras and the troika, led by the European Commission, where the troika will bend to its economic-financial dictates the will of

- the Greek people that had been expressed through elections and a referendum, leading to an outcome manifested as a disavowal of the popular sovereignty that democratic doctrine and culture see condensed in the constitutional and electoral procedures of a liberal democracy;
- 4) The Brexit victory in the June 2016 referendum on whether or not the United Kingdom should remain in the European Union: for the first time in EU history, a member country puts the *exit* option<sup>4</sup> into practice and openly rejects the constraints of Europeanist orthodoxy, thus inflicting a wound on European construction as the ‘home of democracy’. The affair also gives prominence to a political and popular opposition that we define as ‘intra-democratic’ and that, from the United Kingdom, radiates throughout Europe, creating divisions among elites as well as among common people.
  - 5) Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential election. This passage, too, of transnational political significance, gives expression to an ‘intra-democratic’ political opposition that commentators and analysts tend to view in terms of a crisis of democracy, the characters of which (taking away the specificities of the case) trace those of the crisis associated with Brexit, albeit aggravated by a more acute conflict of mutual democratic delegitimation between *pro-establishment* elites and common people versus counter-elites and *anti-establishment* common people;
  - 6) The migration problem. In this case, the crisis that is seen to affect democracies does not coagulate around a specific event but refers to a sort of ‘low continuum’: to a phenomenon that has intensified its impact on the societies and politics of democratic-liberal regimes, with disruptive effects in the context of the last thirty years characterised by economic crises and wars (in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya). Immigrant flows have also imposed critical consequences in democratic countries because they have coincided with a historical phase of ‘political remaking’ (domestic and international) that has produced a de-structuration of 20th-century socio-economic and political-cultural cleavages: hence significant ideological re-orientations have taken shape, which have progressively catalysed an unease or rejection of the model of free movement of people and workers, meaning a widespread rejection of both the ‘neo-liberal’ management of immigration and the culture of a ‘harmonious and enriching multiculturalism’. These last two ideological and functional imperatives of the ‘post-1989’ liberal democracies,<sup>5</sup> in Europe as in the United States, have been countered by popular claims and reasons of identity mobilised by the tensions provoked by the migratory phenomenon (one of the great challenges of our time)<sup>6</sup>.

These salient stages of the democratic crisis in the 21st century have nurtured and nourished ‘democratic malaise’, dissatisfaction and criticism towards today’s liberal democracies: towards the actual functioning of ‘real’ democracies, without, however, overwhelming the democratic idea or principles, values or ‘creed’, or (mostly) the ‘method’ and procedures of democracy, which, according to most scholars in the field, retain their cultural grip and institutional resilience. At the

moment, we take this explanation of the 'crisis in democracy' widespread in public discourse and academic literature as valid, but we note the overflowing of the 'crisis in democracy' into a condition of 'permanent crisis' or 'chronic pathology' of democracy: a diagnosis whose ambiguity will come to the fore later, with regard to *le nom et la chose*<sup>7</sup> democracy.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, we detect a diagnosis of the democratic crisis that, on the whole, is ambiguous or contradictory. On the one hand, there is the thesis according to which, even though momentarily navigating in troubled and treacherous waters, it is considered difficult for the mature democracies of our time to founder in the long run; in fact, it is emphasised that beneath the surface of this contingent turbulence, the future remains on the side of democracy, given that this is the fruit of a culture and of emancipatory values inherent to humanity.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand there is the thesis according to which today's liberal democracies are nothing but 'post-democracies',<sup>9</sup> where the practices and ideology of neo-liberalism actually lead to the demise of democracy.<sup>10</sup> Are we facing a problem of diagnostic uncertainty, which progress and the rigour of scientific knowledge will eventually dissolve? Or are we facing a sort of 'paradox of the democratic fact', where the crisis, perhaps, is a physiological factor of democracy? In short, on a cognitive level, where does the paradigm of the crisis of democracy lead?

The political and sociological literature dealing with the crisis/malaise of democracy, moreover, addresses the phenomenon by identifying it mainly in the *symptoms* of the malaise or crisis.<sup>11</sup> According to the symptoms, it is concluded that clearly, 'quelque chose a basculé dans les démocraties'.<sup>12</sup> But what does this change mean, and what does it depend on? What kind of *explanation* should we refer to? In an attempt to look beyond the *symptoms* and identify the *factors* of the crisis-malaise, the social and political sciences tend to refer to the combined effect (direct or indirect, as the case may be) of certain epoch-making macro-processes. Of these, the following may be considered particularly prominent and pervasive:

- i) the end of socialism (real and ideal);
- ii) the emergence of the era of 'individualisation' and the 'society of individuals';
- iii) the upheavals, in all spheres of (post-, neo-) modern society, linked to the third and fourth industrial revolutions;
- iv) in particular, an accelerated technological, computer-digital revolution and in the systems and practices of communication and information, which causes, on the one hand, a space-time contraction of social life and, on the other hand, pervasive and profound effects both in daily life and in the governance of society;
- v) an acceleration and strong geographic and social extension of globalisation processes as well as a rearticulation of local space;
- vi) a 'silent revolution', which has swept through contemporary societies (first and foremost western societies), associated with greater security in life and an increase in schooling: phenomena, the latter, which have induced significant changes in the cognitive, value and symbolic structure and expectations of individuals;

- vii) the ‘end of the class struggle’ and the neo-liberal political-cultural hegemony: as, for example not a Marxist but a tycoon such as Warren Buffett was to declare in 2006, according to which a ‘class war’ has been fought since the 1980s and it was his class that won.

The factors mentioned above help to explain ‘the why’ of the crisis or malaise of democracy in recent decades, and not only to identify and describe ‘the how’ of the crisis with reference to the symptoms with which it manifests itself.<sup>13</sup> These factors must therefore be taken into due account. However, it should be made clear that they identify socio-historical phenomena of the ‘context’ (extrinsic, so to speak) of the *democratic crisis*. In order to understand and explain the *intrinsic nature of the democratic crisis*, it is necessary to take into account other factors ‘intrinsic’ to democracy as a properly *political* or, if you like, socio-political idea, practice and system. In other words, it is a question of shedding light on those factors of the crisis or malaise of democracy that concern the *politicity* and *historicity* of democracy. It is within this framework that our working hypotheses on the physiology of the ‘democratic fact’, on the nature and historical and political significance of this ‘fact’, come into play. The main working hypothesis of this essay is that the crisis or malaise of democracy in our times can be understood and explained by examining democracy at its ‘roots’. The focus on the *democratic fact* also reveals the basic explanatory limits of the *crisis paradigm* and its misunderstandings about ‘democracy in crisis’. These limitations and misunderstandings lead us to suggest a *different paradigm*, that of the ‘transformation of democracy’: in short, ‘transformation’ instead of ‘crisis’. The explanatory usefulness of this paradigm shift derives from the fact that it allows us to question the extent to which the crisis of democracy reflects a *crisis in the theory of democracy*: a crisis that can be brought into focus, firstly, by opening up the discourse on the implicit postulates from which theories and images of democracy spring, and secondly, by analysing ‘democracy as an open problem’ and not as a phenomenon whose meaning is taken for granted.

### **Metamorphosis of liberal democracy**

It is worth emphasising one point: in the formula of the ‘democracy in crisis’, the democracy at the centre of attention today<sup>14</sup> is that currently known as liberal democracy or, more precisely, *mass representative constitutional liberal democracy*. This is the democracy that today saturates the semantic and political space of democracy and to which is related the paradigm of the crisis ‘in’ or ‘of’ democracy. And it is exactly ‘modern and liberal democracy’ whose meaning, often hastily taken for granted, needs to be clarified and refocused. The primacy of a certain image of liberal democracy and the pervasiveness of the crisis paradigm are closely intertwined: they represent the two sides of the public discourse and theory on democracy that are of interest here. In order to initiate a critical reflection, we will deal jointly with these two faces of the ‘democratic problem’.

One of the theses argued here is that the ‘root of the crisis’ of (liberal) democracy is to be found in the fact that the ‘name’ democracy, univocal and constant, refers to a ‘thing’ democracy that changes over time; hence the formula proposed

here according to which, historically, democracy is a ‘mobile thing’ with a ‘fixed name’. The variability of democracy to which we are referring here does not so much concern the different organisational and institutional forms or functioning of mass liberal constitutional representative democracy to which studies of constitutional law and political science usually look; the variability, furthermore, that we are interested in highlighting here is more subtle; it goes beyond and transverses that which is canonically thematised in terms of ‘democracy of the ancients’ (direct) versus ‘democracy of the moderns’ (representative). The argument is, in fact, that precisely modern liberal democracy itself (beyond its different institutional forms) varies over time.<sup>15</sup> It is also, and above all, the latter that, in history, presents itself as a ‘polymorphous thing’: both when we consider it observing the intertwining of ideal and empirical dimensions and when we observe it in the intertwining of doctrines and institutions, that is in the intertwining of ‘how democracy is *thought*’ and ‘how democracy is *practised* and institutionalised’. These intertwining tend to evade the paradigm of the contemporary crisis and theory of democracy, as does the polymorphous, mutable and ‘in-becoming’ character of democracy in general and liberal democracy more specifically: firstly, it is precisely their conceptual tools that allow such paradigms and such theories, cyclically, to gain sight of and diagnose states of crisis or risks to the survival of liberal democracy under threats and challenges; secondly, it is precisely their way of conceiving democracy and crisis that makes them lose sight of the intrinsically and historically ‘transformative’ nature of the *democratic fact*, including the liberal-democratic case of *the democratic fact*.<sup>16</sup>

The paradigm of the crisis of democracy feeds precisely on the ‘democratic elasticity’ between the (constant) name and the (changing) thing democracy, but it does so without fully grasping the political, historical and theoretical meaning of the *democratic fact*, developing its arguments on the basis of a postulate that dictates and fixes the defining attributes of democracy. This either prevents the crisis paradigm from seeing or leads it to ossify the variability, mutability and polymorphy of the *democracy-thing* and leads it to define such variability, mutability and polymorphy as crisis phenomena that affect the *democracy-thing* when the latter does not match the *democracy-name* fixed in its attributes by the postulate of democracy that drives the crisis paradigm. Hence, we are brought to the other thesis argued in this essay: the ‘crisis of democracy’ is (also and above all) a ‘crisis of theory’. Overcoming the crisis of the theory of democracy is a condition for better understanding and explaining what is happening also in democratic societies and regimes of the neoliberal era. The development and valorisation of a paradigm of the transformation of democracy make it possible:

- i) to highlight how the field of variation of *democracy-thing* is not limited or pre-defined in advance;
- ii) to focus attention (as we shall see here in an exploratory way) on the theme of the postulate(s) of democracy;
- iii) to pursue the ‘interests of knowledge’;
- iv) to make explicit the ideal, value and ideological options which, inexorably, are at stake in the field of science no less than in the field of politics.

Let us consider an exemplary case of the theory of democracy. In a series of seminal essays, Bobbio firmly rejected the topic of ‘transformations of democracy’, with the argument that “the word ‘transformation’ is so vague that it allows radical different assessments” (from the right and the left), and therefore came to the conclusion that it is more useful to focus on ‘real democracy’.<sup>17</sup> But our issue concerns precisely this point. In fact, the problem lies not so much in the vagueness of the word ‘transformation’ but in the fact that it is the *thing-democracy* that turns out to be polymorphous and mutant when we strive to focus on it in its historical coming into being; that is, it is precisely the ‘real democracy’ (the *democracy-thing*) that, from time to time, is transformed while its name (the *democracy-name*) remains fixed. Bobbio’s theory of democracy, faithful to the Schumpeterian postulate<sup>18</sup> but exalting its Kelsenian variant, surreptitiously transfers the fixity of the *name-democracy* to a given and particular *thing-democracy*. That is to say, it is from the option in favour of this postulate (which remains implicit) that the attributes of what is currently called and considered ‘real democracy’ descend, whereas the latter and its attributes are nothing more than the image and meaning of democracy that the adopted postulate gives us. Indeed, throughout history, ‘real democracy’ (*democracy-thing*) is mutable – for reasons related to the nature of the ‘democratic fact’, to the intertwining of the ideal and empirical dimensions of democracy, and to the reciprocal conditioning between doctrines and institutions of democracy, between ‘thought democracy’ and ‘practised democracy’. It is clear that a cognitive operation *à la* Bobbio stamps particular ideological and normative connotations on democracy: those connotations that his postulate of democracy fixes and restores to us as the true, unique and real democracy. But Bobbio overlooks an examination of the variety and mutability, both historical and conceptual, of the *democracy-thing* that stands before the fixity of the *democracy-name*.

In the political culture of today’s democratic societies, the dominance<sup>19</sup> of the paradigm and language of the crisis of democracy persists. This tendency has several implications, both theoretical and empirical, which end up conveying one particular image of democracy to the detriment of others. One of these implications, significant for the discourse of this essay, is that of the ‘reductionism of democracy’. It is a reductionism that has important and obscured effects, which result in the removal of cognitive salience from the plurality of ‘historical models’ of democracy in the analysis of contemporary liberal democracy,<sup>20</sup> as well as in the diagnoses of its conditions. The most serious aspect of this reductionism is that of obliterating the possibility of perceiving the *democratic fact* as a ‘dialectical fact’, first and foremost as a dialectic between the ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ of democracy. Because of the dominant paradigm of the crisis, we are led, not only to restricting, misunderstanding or denying the ‘open to the future’ nature of democracy but also to generating and disseminating undeclared descriptions, explanations or justifications of a ‘closed democracy’ and the historical transformations and political dynamics that convey the latter. These tendencies of the specialist literature and public discourse towards the reduction of the transformative spectrum of democracy and the accentuation of ‘closure’ over democratic ‘openness’ themselves derive from the postulate from which, for the most part implicitly,



current investigations and images of contemporary democracy stem. In this regard, however, it is necessary to point out that the postulates on democracy, and on liberal democracy itself of interest here, to which it is possible to refer (and which have historically been referred to), are multiple: they have been neither univocal nor always the same in the course of the historical process of building the images and explanations, as much as the practices and institutions of democracy.<sup>21</sup> In this framework, we must nevertheless observe that since World War II, one postulate has prevailed over other competing postulates, revealing itself to be paradigmatic: the Schumpeterian postulate, around which 'the Schumpeter problem' takes shape.

### **The Schumpeter problem: deconstructing Schumpeter**

The democracy today diagnosed as in crisis is liberal democracy. This clearly emerges from the specialist literature and public discourse that, for example, opposes it or defends it against populisms, sovereigntisms or an increasingly numerous and varied category of what are identified as 'enemies of democracy' (internal or external). But *which* liberal democracy is it? *Which* liberal democracy has, today, slipped into the 'post-democratic' syndrome, has been brought to the dock and has been exposed to criticism or disaffection? To identify it, we turn to Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, a work recognised as a milestone and turning point in the theory of modern democracy.<sup>22</sup> Yet many of his commentators and analysts of democracy and the contemporary crisis seem to have missed an essential point: in the hands of the Bohemian economist, modern and liberal democracy undergoes a profound revision of its meaning and image.

Schumpeter created a change in the postulate on the basis of which the profile of democracy, and more specifically, of liberal democracy, is redrawn. In the western world, successive to World War II, democracy is thought of and defined, examined, justified and defended in the wake of the Schumpeterian conception: it is this conception that first (especially in the earlier decades) the idea of 'substantial democracy' dear to the political culture of the left (foremost that of socialist, communist or Marxist inspiration); then (in the successive decades) those niches of democratic thought and practice that look towards 'another democracy' (direct, participatory, deliberative or neo-representative) are faced with.

The Schumpeterian conception is, moreover, the frame of reference for the contemporary political paradigm of the 'crisis in/of' democracy and the diagnoses of democratic malaise.

Schumpeter outlines modern and liberal democracy on the basis of an (implicit) postulate according to which, in the words of a first-generation Schumpeterian, democracy is not a 'system of government' but a 'system of government control', that is a system of power limitation.<sup>23</sup> From Schumpeter's postulate it follows, in no uncertain terms, that democracy is not founded on citizen participation but on representation; that it is not founded on the exercise of power by the people but on the delegation of power. To make room for this conception, Schumpeter criticises, to the point of demolition, what he calls the 'classical doctrine' of democracy. It is precisely this operation of redefining democracy that encloses a change of

postulate fraught with relevant implications for the theme of liberal/representative democracy and for our discourse: this operation, in fact, conceals Schumpeterian choices, ambiguities or confusions that have on the whole been neglected by the specialist literature and that instead deserve attention. Meanwhile, the qualification of ‘classical’, which Schumpeter attributes to the doctrine he criticises, leads us to think of the *thing-democracy* of the Athenian *polis*, of the direct and participatory democracy of the ancient Greeks, precisely the ‘classical’ that originated the *name-democracy*. However, the ‘classical’ doctrine to which Schumpeter refers and from which he subtracts any empirical validity is, instead, the doctrine that has been formulated precisely for modern and liberal democracy and which in his arguments Schumpeter in fact superimposes on that of the ancients, to the point of mixing and confusing the characteristics that Rousseau attributes to democracy with those that Bentham or John Stuart Mill attribute to it. In short, the ‘classical doctrine’ dismissed by Schumpeter is not that of ancient Greece, which, moreover, in 1819 Constant<sup>24</sup> had already dismissed as an ideological and perverse remnant of a distant world; that is to say, it is not that ‘classical democracy’ to which current political science literature refers and which is contrasted with ‘modern democracy’.<sup>25</sup>

The classical doctrine of democracy that Schumpeter rejects on the grounds of theoretical, practical and even ideal inconsistency is therefore the doctrine of classical modern and *liberal* democracy: that democracy, first, shaken by the political thought of the Enlightenment, then, put into practice in the liberal age (albeit with the limitations of political-electoral inclusion of the people). Schumpeter blunders not a little, since in ‘his’ classical doctrine he lumps together Rousseau and Bentham, and even John Stuart Mill. Thus, the critique that targets classical liberal democracy ends up making one of a Rousseau and a John Stuart Mill: for Schumpeter, the Genevan who looks to direct, participatory democracy and popular self-governing of the city-states as a constitutional model for modern democracy makes one with the Londoner who considers indirect and representative democracy co-extensive with the nation-state.<sup>26</sup> The diriment question here is that of representation. This question takes on particular salience if, appropriately, we try to historicise the Schumpeterian analysis.

At the time of Schumpeter’s writing *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, the ‘representative shift’, it should be pointed out, was already historically acquired on the Western political-institutional horizon, even in the context of the so-called communist regimes defined as totalitarian. The Schumpeterian emphasis on democracy as *pluralistic and competitive* representation is, however, and not by chance, a discriminating element, a child of the opposition of the *liberal democracy* of the ‘free world’ to socialism or the claims of a *socialist democracy*. In that historical phase, the focus of attention (including Schumpeter’s) is, in short, that contraposition sharpened in the incipient Cold War and in the context of the struggle between the ‘free-liberal world’ and the ‘Soviet-communist world’, where what is at stake (political, doctrinaire and identity or ideological) is which of the two worlds can effectively and legitimately define itself as democratic;<sup>27</sup> what is at stake is which is the ‘true democracy’, given that even communist systems define themselves as

democratic. In this post-war historical and political context, at the level of the international system and with repercussions also within some countries of the 'free world', there is a symbolic-political and cultural-ideological conflict over 'true democracy': confronting each other are, to give just two influential examples, the 'new popular democracy' defended by Mao Zedong<sup>28</sup> and the 'new liberal democracy' alluded to by Churchill.<sup>29</sup> It is worth remembering and pointing out that those post-war 'new democracies' referred to by Churchill and Mao Zedong, respectively, are in both cases mass, representative regimes, both based on a constitution. Some, however, are structured, formally and officially, on a 'multi-party' system; others, instead, are structured, formally and officially, on a 'one-party' system. What is happening at the time, not even subtly, is a typical ideological 'conflict of appropriation' of the *name-democracy* between two different *things-democracy*. To get to the heart of the matter, *capitalism* and *socialism* are competing over democracy and its 'authentic' and 'real' meaning. This is one of the salient aspects of the (ideological) 'culture war' that characterises the bipolar world and the division of Europe following World War II. Although attenuated in the course of time, this is how it will be, for various reasons, until the end of the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> And it is worth remembering that Schumpeter develops his analysis of democracy in a work entitled, not by chance, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.<sup>31</sup>

Let us pick up the thread. The 'classical doctrine' of democracy of which Schumpeter speaks refers to modern and (also) liberal democracy, as found in Europe between the 17th-18th centuries and the 20th century (both in the *corpus* of doctrine and institutional organisation). The *thing-democracy* to which the *name-democracy* is given in this case is (for a long time even formally) an 'oligarchic democracy' – or rather, one of the many historical variants of 'that mixed government' that was already active in ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Making extensive use of critical arguments against the 'democracy of the ancients', however, Schumpeter criticises (implicitly) the epistemic, value and ideological postulate on the basis of which modern and liberal democracy had been defined and organised until then. Schumpeter's theoretical contribution will prove decisive in sanctioning the demise of modern liberal democracy in the dominant political culture and mainstream social sciences. The golden and original postulate of democracy, to which the meaning of democracy as the 'sovereignty of the people' has also been traced since political modernity, is now being questioned to the point of disappearing.

With Schumpeter, in short, disqualified and marginalised is the 'postulate of meaning' of democracy

- i) that had been made its own by the 'classical' liberal doctrine;
- ii) that had been reaffirmed and defended by the socialist doctrine and then by real socialism;
- iii) that has characterised historical populisms and that, in the end, has in fact been taken up by contemporary neo-populisms;
- iv) a 'postulate of meaning' of democracy that, finally, for good or ill, *volens nolens*, continues to survive as much in the legitimising ideology and rhetoric

of the mass representative liberal democracies (i.e. polyarchies, neo-liberal democracies, post-democracies of our time) as in their formal institutional procedures and constitutional orders.

Nevertheless, the historical, political and cultural significance of this golden and original 'postulate of meaning' of democracy, in Schumpeter's view, is not enough to raise questions about his intellectual operation: it is *not his problem*. Overcoming the democratic postulate of popular sovereignty for Schumpeter means enabling *his version* of liberal democracy, portrayed as the only 'real' democracy, to achieve three main objectives:

- 1) take the name, identity and symbol of democracy away from socialism (ideal or real, in theory and in practice), from that socialism which constitutes the main challenger to Western democracy, both within the framework of the post-war bipolar international system and within the national states of the 'free world';
- 2) redefine in an elitist key the *thing-democracy* to which the *name-democracy* is to be attributed;
- 3) emphasise the 'elective affinities' between modern democracy (based on a competitive political market) and modern capitalism (based on a competitive economic market), postulating the existence of a harmony or correspondence between democracy and capitalism in the realm of the real: a harmony/correspondence between the logic of functioning and balance that defines capitalism (economics) and that which defines democracy (politics).

To summarise, Schumpeter's intellectual operation aims to make *democracy-name* coincide with *democracy-thing*, understanding democracy in the terms in which it is practised in the Western world and in the terms in which it is restored to us and justified on the basis of the Schumpeterian postulate of democracy.

The Schumpeterian postulate has, this essay argues, relevant implications for *democracy-thing*. In order to try to bring these implications into focus, another step forward in the argument must be taken – that of examining in depth what the intellectual operation of 'replacing the postulate' of democracy carried out by Schumpeter consists of, because it is in this intellectual operation that the idea of liberal democracy, still dominant today, is affirmed. This intellectual operation has two main facets: one is explicit, thematised by Schumpeter himself and can be clearly seen in studies on contemporary democracy; the other is implicit, neither thematised nor grasped, or rather, neglected in the specialist literature. Let us see then, in succession, what happens, so to speak, in the Schumpeterian *on-stage* and what in the Schumpeterian *back-stage*.

Schumpeter identifies the constituent elements of what he calls the 'classical' doctrine in the existence of a 'common good' and a 'common will of the people', as well as in the 'active participation' of the members of the political community in the promotion of the common good and the control of the conduct of public affairs.<sup>32</sup> Here, his critical arguments are well known and introjected by political

studies orthodoxy. Schumpeter holds favourable cards in demonstrating how 'real democracy' lacks the traits that classical liberal doctrine attributes to it: in his view, such traits simply cannot exist in a minimally complex and developed society.<sup>33</sup> However, in order to grasp the subtleties of his conceptual operation of changing the postulate of democracy, it is misleading to focus on his explicit critique of the classical doctrine. Rather, the crux of the operation, relevant to our discourse, refers to the celebrated 'democratic method'. Here, we must not overlook the fact that the 'democratic method' of which Schumpeter speaks is *not one but two*, since he also identifies a democratic method for the doctrine he liquidates.

For the 'classical' (liberal) doctrine, Schumpeter states,

[T]he democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals, who are to assemble in order to carry out its will.<sup>34</sup>

This method clearly has little to do with the direct and participatory democracy of the ancient Greeks. Despite the already mentioned Schumpeterian ambiguity in this regard, the method of the 'classical' doctrine of which he speaks does in fact refer to modern representative and parliamentary democracies. This method in fact provides:

- i) that political decisions are made by a set of individuals (the *elected*);
- ii) that the elected are selected by popular vote (the *elections*);
- iii) that the elected come together (the *parliament*) to represent the people (representation);
- iv) that the responsibility for making authoritative decisions rests with the elected, as are legitimised by the popular vote;
- v) that this whole process takes place according to constitutional principles and rules (the emerging *modern constitutionalism*).

It is true that this definition of the 'classical method' is silent on the characteristics of pluralism and competition in the democratic process, but given that the 'classical' doctrine illustrated and targeted by Schumpeter explicitly refers (also) to the influential liberal John Stuart Mill, that is the author of *On Liberty* (1859) and *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), it would be out of place to conclude that pluralism and competition do not qualify the 'classical', Enlightenment-liberal doctrine of democracy and its method targeted by Schumpeter. The Schumpeterian rejection of the democratic method that he attributes to the 'classical' doctrine does neither therefore find reason and explanation in the latter's procedural flaws or voids (as Schumpeter seems to suggest and as has been credited by the Schumpeterian *vulgata*), nor does it find reason and explanation in the fact that this doctrine rejects pluralism and competition. In short, with regard to its procedural and constitutional liberal aspects, the democratic method that

Schumpeter attributes to the 'new doctrine' he outlines is so far superimposable on that of the 'classical' doctrine he criticises and rejects. However, the two doctrines are not superimposable for other reasons, which are the ones that actually account for the extent of the change in the postulate of democracy achieved by Schumpeter. Let us see why. Firstly, because the democratic method that Schumpeter outlines for 'his doctrine' rejects the identification of democracy *tout court* with the sovereignty of the people and with the pursuit of the common good, aspects that Schumpeter considers as democratic folklore, fictitious creations and pure artefacts, as well as being devoid of any rationality. Secondly, it does not seem really clear which are the two doctrines compared by Schumpeter. In fact, with 'his method' of democracy, Schumpeter redesigns the structure, the hierarchy and the connections relative to the constituent elements of democracy. In this way he arrives at the formulation of a theory (or doctrine) that 'sees' and 'creates a view' of modern and liberal democracy no longer through the lens of 'classical' (but also 'liberal' doctrine and method), but instead through the lens of 'Schumpeterian' doctrine and method of democracy. The crucial issues arising from this change in the postulate of democracy concern the redefinition of the *central subject*, the *end* and the *means* involved in the democratic process, namely the conceptual *syntax* of the method and not its conceptual *vocabulary*.

To summarise, for the 'classical method', elections are the instrument (*the means*) through which the people-voters (*the central subject*) confer mandate and democratic legitimacy on the representatives-elect so that the latter (*the facilitating subject*) with their decisions realise the 'common good' (*the end*) indicated by the general will of the people. In this framework, the concept and logic of representation imply a process of transferring legitimacy to 'exercised power': that is a delegation of the exercise of authorised power to representatives and political elites who act as facilitators of the realisation of the common good and the will of the people. Schumpeter opposes this method with his own: "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote".<sup>35</sup> In this case, the democratic process is roughly restructured as follows: elections are the instrument (*the means*) by virtue of which the competing political elites (*the central subject*), availing themselves of the consent of the people-voters (*the facilitating subject*), seek to acquire the power and institutional offices (*the end*) to make decisions and choose *policies* they themselves define, decisions and *policies* that for Schumpeter are a sort of by-product (or collateral product) of the elites' actions aimed at acquiring power, goods and privileges (personal or group).<sup>36</sup>

Commentators and followers of Schumpeterian theory, in the wake of the argumentative strategy followed by the master, have focused on the Schumpeterian critique of the specific constituent elements of the 'classical' doctrine (common good, common will of the people, active participation). However, this path has diverted attention from the decisive and more subtle aspects that qualify the Schumpeterian operation of changing the 'postulate of meaning' of democracy and surpassing the

‘classical’ doctrine. This distraction has led the theory of current democracy to acquire and axiomatically take for granted three conclusions:

- 1) modern liberal democracy has nothing to do with the ‘classical’ (liberal) doctrine of democracy;
- 2) modern liberal democracy is that of the ‘Schumpeterian method’ and is the only real democracy;
- 3) ‘real democracy’, *sic et simpliciter*, is something else from ‘ideal democracy’, with which it has little to do.

The intertwining of these three conclusions has resulted not only in the dominant paradigm in political and sociological studies on democracy but also in the embarrassment of such studies in theoretical and empirical research. One of the consequent embarrassing situations is that scholars of democracy are still called upon to come to terms, first, with the repercussions that the democratic ideal has *empirically* in the democratic reality; second, with the need to recover the ideal-normative dimension of ‘real democracy’ in order to explain the bases of legitimacy of contemporary liberal democracies;<sup>37</sup> thirdly, with the effort of having to exhibit and explain the ‘good reasons’ of today’s neo-liberal (‘real’) democracies, that is those reasons on the basis of which ‘real democracies’ deserve to be defended against the claims that threaten them, reasons that invariably end up appealing to the ideal values of (liberal) democracy.<sup>38</sup> It is no coincidence that, in the context of one of the cyclical moments of debate on the crisis of democracy, Bobbio<sup>39</sup> cannot help but seriously consider the ideal dimension of democracy. Such retrievals of the ideal dimension of democracy aim at a revision and, at the same time, a shoring up of the Schumpeterian conception, but, on closer inspection, they also lead to a short circuit of the theory and image of democracy still dominant and elaborated on Schumpeter’s shoulders.<sup>40</sup>

### The postulate of ‘dual democracy’

From the analysis conducted so far, it emerges that democracy presents itself, by its nature and historical vicissitude, as polymorphous and subject to transformation. By deconstructing and reconstructing the Schumpeterian conception of democracy, it can be seen how this conception is itself a historical and doctrinal example that illustrates the metamorphosis of democracy: under the unchanging ‘name’ of (liberal) democracy between the 18th and the first half of the 20th century, a transformation of what came to be understood as modern and liberal democracy took place. The significance and observability of the metamorphosis of democracy are made intelligible by considering the postulates at play. Under this light we can observe that historically the ‘name’ liberal democracy does not change, while to result changing is the ‘thing’ liberal democracy. The Schumpeterian overthrowing of the doctrine of classical liberal democracy was achieved through a change in the postulate of democracy: with Schumpeter and from him onwards, democracy tends to



be thought, represented and experienced in other guises. This intellectual operation in its own way reveals, but at the same time conceals, the meaning and description of what this essay calls the 'democratic fact'. The most pervasive Schumpeterian legacy is enclosed in this change of the postulate of democracy, from which the new *frame that gives life to* the democratic 'reality' derives. On the issue of democracy and the crisis of democracy, it is necessary to come to terms with this.

Some insights from Eisenstadt<sup>41</sup> are useful to us in trying to clarify how the theory and analysis of democracy and the related diagnoses of the conditions of contemporary democracies are profoundly conditioned by the postulate of democracy that guides the knowledge relating to the phenomena under investigation. This will allow us to take some steps forward in our working hypothesis on the *democratic fact*.

Eisenstadt emphasises the existence of two basic conceptions of democracy: the 'constitutional' and the 'participatory'. Both characterise the meaning and the *name-democracy*, and both accompany the history of the *thing-democracy*, namely the history of modern constitutional democratic regimes from their origins. The structural and content profiles of the two conceptions differ significantly, neither from the profiles of democracy found in the distinction between the two doctrines of democracy as seen with Schumpeter nor from their reformulation in current political studies, in which the distinction is frequently declined in terms of Madisonian liberal democracy versus Rousseauian populist democracy.<sup>42</sup> The aspect that interests us here is that Eisenstadt, unlike the conventional liberal-democratic theoretical line,<sup>43</sup> considers the two conceptions not as alternatives to each other but as complementary, although in competition with each other; both, not by chance, have contributed to forging the values and ideological, political and institutional contents of contemporary democracy. The elements that qualify the 'constitutional conception' are to a large extent shared by the 'participatory conception': it is their characteristic accents and priorities that differ. In particular, the 'participatory conception',<sup>44</sup> compared to the 'constitutional', emphasises the role of effective and constant participation in the democratic political process by broad strata of citizenry, both in the electoral phases and, more generally, in public and political life, both in the designation of governors and in the construction of *policies* and choices made by representative governments.

Characterised in this way, participatory conception and the 'political action' it inspires have historically come, from time to time, to question the democratic nature of the 'constitutional solutions' and the electoral process established in *constituted democracies*: this is because they believe that constitutional solutions and the electoral process in their actual functioning lead to a weakening or perverting of the 'political weight' of citizens and their vote, that is they tend to set 'barriers of democratic legitimacy' that exclude or discriminate against a significant part of the claims for democracy and the social and political subjects that champion them. Because the discrimination against or the exclusion of such claims, as well as gate-keeping mechanisms that *weaken or pervert the* 'political weight' of a section of citizenry, are judged contrary to the spirit, principles and practice of democracy, the participatory conception presses for a more egalitarian, more inclusive,



more salient and more effective participation; it claims a more influential *voice* of citizenship in order to make possible a redefinition of the attributes and equilibria of the existing democratic system. On these bases, we can say that the participatory conception opens up to the idea and demands of a *constituent democracy*: to ideas and practices aimed at a redefinition of the *acquis démocratique* defended by the constitutional conception. On these same bases, the participatory conception raises a further question with respect to the constitutional conception: that of the purely formal character of the representative institutions and of the constitution itself, which are then contested because they, in order to defend and maintain the constituted political order, tend to be degraded (by a variety of dominant political, economic and socio-cultural forces) to the point of being reduced to 'democratic fictions'. Viewed through the lens of the participatory conception outlined by Eisenstadt, the political process of a *constituted democracy*, although formally pluralistic and competitive, tends to promote the political voice and interests, opinions and voting weight of certain groups (typically those of the richest and strongest, privileged or 'central' categories of citizens) and to depower those of the weaker or 'peripheral' categories. So while the participatory conception emphasises (constituent) democracy as *open and inclusive* representative government, centred on the many included in the *ownership* of legitimate power, the constitutional conception emphasises (constituted) democracy as *closed and exclusionary* representative government, where the baricenters are the few included in the exercise of legitimate power around whom gravitate those who may enjoy guarantees or are accorded them in their expectations and preferences.

Well-known themes resurface from the contrast between the two democratic traditions. A couple of them deserve to be recalled here: the historically oligarchic or elitist character of the 'real democracies' (or constituted liberal democracies) focused on the basis of Schumpeterian postulates; the democratic limits of elections, representation and institutional procedures that the constitutional conception firmly defends as 'sacred' and guarantors of the democratic order, where the participatory conception challenges them as distorting the democratic order. These are themes variously raised today not only by populisms or their political entrepreneurs but also by scholars who, while pleading the cause of liberal democracies, do not remain silent on the complexity of the democratic phenomenon, nor on the ambiguities and contradictions of 'real' liberal democracies or on the many faces these can and do assume.<sup>45</sup>

There is no intention here to minimise the relevance of the reasons for the contrast between the constitutional conception and the participatory one, nor to deny the 'good reasons' that both of them can put forward. Rather, the purpose is to recover and explain, within the framework of the 'democratic fact', the democratic 'sense' and value of one of these conceptions, the participatory one, which today tends to be rejected by the field of democratic legitimacy typically defined by the prevailing image of 'real' liberal democracies. In today's heated public and scholarly debate, the conception that Eisenstadt defines as 'participatory' is mostly dismissed as expressive of populisms that are undemocratic and retrogressive by definition and which are contrasted with liberal and virtuous democracies by

definition, in a zero-sum game on democracy that does little to clarify and much to distort the issue of democracy and its crisis. Our working hypothesis on *democracy as a democratic fact* implies a refocusing of the theoretical and ideological background within which it can be shown how the participatory conception moves alongside the constitutional one. The two conceptions, with the images of democracy that they restore to us (and with the social, political and cultural claims that they respectively bring out), both perform 'systemic' functions: functions whose co-presence traces and structures the 'open' historical and political logic peculiar to the *democratic fact*. The working hypothesis presented here discloses a theoretical-analytical approach that is fruitful for understanding the 'name' and the 'thing' of democracy and their relationship: this is a theme that is unfortunately removed from current analyses of contemporary 'democratic' societies and regimes, as well as from diagnoses of their malaise (or crisis).

Over the years, the public and scholarly debate on the crisis or malaise of democracy has appeared strongly rooted in visions and evaluations that deny the democratic qualification to the various movements or political entrepreneurs of neo-populism (of the right, left or centre), to which a liberal democracy is contrasted. The meaning of democracy is that derived (often implicitly) from the Schumpeterian postulate<sup>46</sup> in these types of visions and evaluations, with all the 'partisan' or prejudicial implications of the case. The Schumpeterian postulate, however, impedes analysis and understanding of democracy in its *historicity* and *politicity*, that is, as a *democratic fact*.

The framing concept of the 'democratic fact' allows us to see three essential dimensions of the historical and political meaning of democracy. A few considerations help to exemplify 'what is inside the democratic fact'. Below our argument is set out in three main passages.

- 1) Democracy, with its institutions, can be understood as a political system that governs the provision and distribution of goods, resources and services (tangible and intangible, economic and symbolic) that are deemed relevant to the lives of citizens, groups and the political community. Democracy as a constitutionalised process and procedures through which the 'authoritative *erga omnes* assignment of values in a society' (as, with Easton, the liberal-democratic tradition suggests) takes place;
- 2) The political mission of democracy entrusts government and political institutions with the objective of reducing the economic, social and cultural inequalities and exclusions of capitalist society, which are physiologically produced by the allocative logic of resources typical of the market.<sup>47</sup> The objective of reducing these inequalities and exclusions is of primary importance for a political system that *names* itself a democracy, since these also produce marked power and political inequalities or exclusions among citizens and groups, which affect the constitutional democratic and electoral processes. In other words, these inequalities and exclusions heavily influence the political process that defines, institutionalises and constitutionalises the criteria and rules for the

distribution of social resources (above all, *power* and the ability to weigh in on public choices) on which the effectiveness of (social and political) pluralism and the effectiveness of the democratic values of freedom and equality depend. The *effectiveness* of pluralism, freedom and equality is a (typically democratic) issue that characterises the *democratic fact*: it is the *historicity* and *politicity* of democracy (emphasised by the theory of the *democratic fact*) that show the existence of collective claims and struggles so that pluralism, freedom and equality are not only defined at the formal level and in constitutional charters (*entitlements*) (as the liberal-democratic tradition is inclined to see) but also substantiated by the implementation of forms and contents of social justice (*capacities*) (as the *socialist-democratic* tradition suggests, for example);

- 3) At this point, however, it is appropriate to look beyond the one-sided reading of *constituted democracy* and its institutions. Historically, democracy and institutions are part of the *democratic fact*: they are intimately characterised by *historicity* and *politicity*, and as such they are part of a process; they can become (or not) an arena, and they can feed (or not) political instruments of change in society and the given order, or enter (or not) into the game of the 'self-transformation' of democracy. In this sense, *democracy as a democratic fact* reveals itself (or has historically revealed itself) to be what we call a 'political field':<sup>48</sup> the field of power struggles between groups pursuing different ideas and structures on how to organise the socio-political order and how to regulate the allocation of social resources (starting with the resources of power). Viewed from this perspective, moreover, democracy becomes analysable as the political field of the 'struggle for recognition' (or denial) of the democratic identity and legitimacy of the subjects of socio-political pluralism.

Eisenstadt's analysis offers stimulating arguments. It outlines a change of postulate with respect to the Schumpeterian analysis, but without reactivating a postulate that takes us back to the so-called classical democracy: it suggests, rather, a postulate that conveys a 'dual conception' of democracy.<sup>49</sup> From the Eisenstadtian postulate, in fact, it follows that democracy is an equally 'constitutional' and 'participatory' phenomenon. This, from our point of view, opens our eyes to the *democratic fact*. That is, it:

- i) helps to detect the *historicity* of democracy, the manifestation of which is captured in the social, cultural and political processes that structure the development of democratic regimes with reference to the articulation and interweaving of a plurality of conceptions of democracy;<sup>50</sup>
- ii) helps to detect the *politicity* of democracy, outlining the structural character of democracy in a dialectical, dynamic, changeable and conflictual key.

A 'dual conception' of democracy, such as Eisenstadt's, allows us, firstly, to approach *the problem of democracy* (or 'democracy as a problem'): democracy as a changing 'thing', but with a fixed 'name'. Such a conception also allows us,

secondly, to focus on a variety of phenomena associated with the *systemic transformation* of the social and political order. In this latter regard, we mean to phenomena that typically innervate the *democratic fact*, such as:

- i) the emergence of new classes or social strata carrying interests, claims and ideas dissatisfied by the established order;
- ii) the expression of challenges for power launched by social and political counter-elites to the established power order and elites;
- iii) the appearance of new ideological, rhetorical and communicative tools for mobilising consensus and electoral support;
- iv) the emergence of innovations in the patterns and practices of government or governance of public affairs, in the production, implementation and evaluation of *policies*;
- v) the tendency to politicise, from time to time, different issues, fractures, interests, values, ideas and collective sentiments, and hence the tendency to vary the politicisation of the agenda of public discourse, the profiles of collective identities and the forms and contents of social conflicts;
- vi) the protagonism of socio-political movements and protests, more or less organised, that push for a change in society through the questioning of one or more ‘cornerstones’ of the established democratic order (elites, political class, institutional order, political direction, public policies, languages and values). In particular, central among these phenomena is the politicisation of subjects, actions, claims, ‘public discourse on public affairs’ and the rules of the democratic-constitutional game that define the political scene, where objectives of a particularistic or corporatist nature mingle and overlap with others of a general or universalistic nature inherent to the ‘common good’ or the ‘just society’, objectives that mobilise rhetorical arts, symbols and identity values.

The tension and conflicts between the two Eisenstadian conceptions (or universes) of democracy are mitigated when in a democratic society or regime one of them gains the status of *systemic political hegemony*. However, not even in such cases are societies or regimes entirely free of tensions around models or aspirations of democracy; rather, conflicts and tensions remain latent and ready to erupt at some juncture, especially in situations of intense change. As Eisenstadt points out, the explosion of tensions is a possibility “inherent in modern constitutional democratic regimes because the different concepts of democracy analyzed and the tension among them are embedded in their basic premises and in their historical and ideological roots”.<sup>51</sup>

### **The democratic fact and the Heisenberg principle**

As observed above, Eisenstadt’s analysis of democracy offers a basis for the identification of a postulate of democracy quite unlike the Schumpeterian one. From a reformulation of some of Eisenstadt’s arguments, we derive useful elements to

move towards a 'conclusion' that is not a conclusion, but rather a further focusing of the *democratic fact*, of the attributes of historicity and politicity of democracy, and, therefore, of the metamorphic physiology of democracy. In this regard, the following are some salient exploratory passages.

Democracy, as a *democratic fact*, is defined by the co-presence in the historical 'field' of politics of different claims and subjects, which are engaged in a (antagonistic or agonistic) relationship,<sup>52</sup> some oriented towards a constitutional conception of democracy, others towards a participatory one. The two conceptions typify modes of politics that are different from each other but which both fulfil 'elementary functions' of the *democratic fact*: respectively, the systemic function of conservation and the systemic function of changing the established order at a given historical moment. Put differently, between the claims and subjects that interpret the two functions, there is, in the *final instance*, a conflictual relationship of a systemic nature, which is part of democratic physiology. The *democratic fact*, to reformulate it in the light of Eisenstadt's argument, consists in a process of defining and redefining the authoritative 'radius of political action'; hence, it concerns, first and foremost, the structuring of power and its legitimacy, including the definition and institutional articulation of power (and its legitimacy), as well as the definition and structuring of the space in which power (and its legitimacy) is applied. But, at the same time, the *democratic fact* concerns the definition and redefinition of:

- i) the 'common good', starting from the 'common good-democracy';
- ii) the system of citizenship, starting from the rights and duties of the members of a political community
- iii) the norms regulating behaviour and activities in a society, starting from the norms relating to the cultural sphere and the economic sphere, spheres that preside over the production-appropriation-circulation-(re)distribution of the variety of goods and values (material and immaterial), such as economic interests, ideals, 'meanings of things', symbols, languages and words (resources that can be both public and private).

The *democratic fact*, with its subjects and the claims mobilised by them, in some form or measure, is at the root of a great variety of societies and political regimes in history and the present (if not almost all). That is, it can be found even in cases conventionally not classified as democratic (or liberal-democratic). It can manifest itself through various forms of protest, contestation and struggle that have as their object the definition or redefinition of authoritative political action and its scope. The regimes that the contemporary political and constitutional cultures prevailing in the western 'free world' recognise as (liberal) democratic (at least on a formal level) are distinguished (or should be distinguished) from the others by their greater degree of openness of the arena and scope of political action, as well as by a constitutional institutionalisation of this openness, according to the principles of freedom and equality. But, we must emphasise, it is also in these same democratic regimes that, in the course of history, we observe different democratic cases and, above all,

a variety and transformation of democracy on the 'open democracy-closed democracy' axis. In short, the different regimes that take the *name-democracy* slide along this latter transformative axis, where the *thing-democracy* is anything but univocal.

In modern and contemporary democratic regimes that are protagonists in Western history, tensions and conflicts over the scope of authoritative political action take on meanings, forms and contents that we can ideal-typically ascribe to the constitutional and participatory conceptions. These two conceptions summarise the essential terms in which the fundamental *cleavage* (or *meta-cleavage*) inherent in the *politicity* of that *thing* to which the *name* democracy has been given is constituted. The subjects and claims that, in the social, cultural and political spheres, recognise themselves in the constitutional conception of democracy tend to defend the *rationale* of the scope of political action and the established rules of the game; they look to the maintenance of the constitutionally given order; they aim to preserve the principles, criteria and norms through which the structuring and legitimacy of power in the constitutional order in force is conceived and pursued; they aim to preserve the 'common good', rights and duties, cultural norms and those of the appropriation and distribution of social resources (power, status, wealth etc.); they also aim to preserve the 'common good', the 'common good' and the 'common good'. They also aim to preserve those institutional procedures that guide and constrain any redefinition of the established constitutional order. The subjects and claims that are oriented towards a participatory conception of democracy, on the other hand, push for a profound, sometimes 'radical', change and broadening of the *rationale* of the scope of political action and the established rules of the game. The subjects and claims that can be traced back to the participatory conception move in an opposing direction to the established order insofar as they believe that the scope of political action and the existing representative institutions do not meet the interests and values of the entire community, but only those of some specific sectors that, in spite of what is sometimes formally envisaged, tend to privilege the 'central' categories to the detriment of the variously 'peripheral', marginal or excluded. The supporters of the participatory conception, therefore, defend the reasons for 'change of the system' (and not just those for 'change in the system') through prospective programmes, lines of action, ideas, language and watchwords whose legitimacy is derived not only from the 'given constitutional definition' of political action, the distribution of power, institutional arrangements etc. but also, if not above all, from meta-legitimation: that is from a legitimation that goes beyond that deriving from the institutions of the constituted order (constitution in force, established procedures), although, at the same time, the actors of the participatory conception not infrequently move 'through these very institutions'.<sup>53</sup>

In the case of modern and contemporary democratic regimes, therefore, the coexistence of different and mutually conflicting conceptions of democracy raises a number of issues for the theory and analysis of democracy, namely:

- i) the relationship between 'constituted democracy' and 'constituent democracy';
- ii) the relationship between democracy and capitalism;

- iii) the relationship between elites and the masses and that between elites and counter-elites;
- iv) the relationship between 'centres' and 'peripheries';
- v) the relationship between conservation, innovation and change and that between reform and revolution with reference to the (constitutional) political order, its balances of power and the sources of legitimacy of both power and democracy.

To consider democracy as a *democratic fact*, as a phenomenon charged with politics and historicity, allows us to frame such themes in a perspective that shines a light on the intrinsically transformative nature of democracy and to address these themes with a conceptual-analytical framework and with variables consistent with the perspective adopted. The perspective of the *democratic fact*, moreover, opens up a 'conditional analysis'<sup>54</sup> of the transformative phenomena of democracy: it allows us to formulate hypotheses relating, on the one hand, to the 'when' and 'why' (and under what conditions) the historically transformative character of democracy unfolds or does not unfold; on the other hand, to formulate hypotheses relating to the 'how' it unfolds, to the different forms that the self-transformation of democracy can take (at times 'continuist'/gradualist, at times 'dis-continuist'/revolutionary). The historical conjunctures (the *when*), the factors (the *why*) and the forms (the *how*) of the transformation of democracy are linked to the conditions of 'openness' or 'closure' of a given democracy at a given time, that is, to the balances and imbalances of power between the forces and between the cultures of democratic *political* pluralism. It is in this framework that it emerges how democratic regimes have historically witnessed

the development of various structural, semiliminal enclaves within which new cultural orientations, new modes of the reach for meaning – often couched in transcendental terms – tend to be developed and upheld, partially as countercultures, partially as components of new cultural scenes.<sup>55</sup>

An important effect of the above phenomena is the formation of social and political-identity *cleavages*<sup>56</sup> that structure the political field *and* party systems of liberal democracies. Of these cleavages between the 19th and 20th centuries, the one that catalysed the main dynamics of democratic pluralism was that on the right-left ideological axis, with a liberal-moderate and pro-system right typically oriented towards the systemic preservation of capitalist society and the liberal-democratic regime, and a socialist-radical and anti-system left oriented towards systemic change in the direction of, for example, a society of (first) public or (then) social market economy (private-public *mix*) and in the direction of a pluralist socialist democracy (historical social democracy).<sup>57</sup> From the second half of the 20th century onwards, this transformative dialectic of democracy on the left-right axis progressively faltered. This all takes place well before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, that is, in the historical phase in which the main traditional forces of the (socialist) left that have managed to get into government tend to converge



with the traditional forces of the (liberal) right, and this to the point of the right and left sharing, on the one hand, the definition of the scope of political action and, on the other, the objective of systemic maintenance of the political order: first the capitalist and liberal democratic order, and then the neo-capitalist and neo-liberal democratic order. The forces of the left thus end up abandoning their traditional socio-political role and function: they cease to represent politically a 'system alternative' with respect to society (capitalist and market) and to 'real' democracy (that of liberal, neo-liberal inspiration); they cease, that is to represent that 'sense of alternative' that has also been relevant in the historical development of modern and contemporary society; they cease to represent an alternative to politics as a more or less administered market.

In other words, even the forces of the historical left progressively came to embrace the constitutional conception of democracy, repudiating the participatory one. But politics knows no vacuum. Nor does the *democratic fact* (with its *politicity* and *historicity*) know vacuum. The consequence is that while the forces of the left are leaving behind the role, function and political identity of the *systemic alternative* (or 'anti-systemic'),<sup>58</sup> this does not mean that the claims and subjects of 'anti-systemic politics' are completely (or definitively) lost: those claims and subjects aiming at a systemic change of that society and of that constituted democratic order that are dear to the 'pro-system' claims and subjects, according to which society and the constituted democratic order are not only 'the best of all possible worlds' of Panglossian memory but also what is 'real'. As much as the systemic character of the claims and subjects of 'change in the system' escape the image of democracy produced by a Schumpeterian (or neo-Schumpeterian) 'postulate of democratic meaning', these claims and subjects, with their role, function and political identity, have been and continue to be interpreters of *systemic* dynamics and mechanisms constitutive of *democracy as a democratic fact*. The perspective of the *democratic fact* reveals how these claims and subjects, in fact, never disappear forever; rather, it may happen that in certain historical phases they rest (marginally) in a state of latency, or that in the course of time other social and political forces appear to occupy the political space left vacant (most recently by the left). Today, for example to name the family of political forces that are most successful or at the centre of attention in the discourses on the crisis or malaise of democracy, we can make the case of the so-called neo-populisms: different from each other in various respects, but all often seen as opposing or negating not only liberal democracy but also democracy *tout-court*. And yet, today, that *systemic* function of 'anti-system' politics that nourishes *democracy as a democratic fact* can be associated with the claims of which those very political subjects labelled as neo-populisms are the interpreters and political entrepreneurs.

Focusing on the *democratic fact* helps to make clear that the dialectic between pro-system and anti-system politics, beyond any value judgements or ideological orientations of each, is a *transformative dialectic of democracy*, in which the *politicity* of democracy is expressed. In order to grasp the root nature of the social and political processes taking place today, the theory and analysis of democracy, including those dealing with the crisis or malaise of democracy, must change their



interpretative paradigm. This requires, on the one hand, an overcoming of the Schumpeterian postulate on which the theory and analysis of democracy continue to be based; on the other hand, the adoption of a 'dual democracy' postulate and a rethinking of democracy in terms of *democratic fact*, *historicity* and *politicity*.

Since the triumph of neo-liberalism and the demise of the socialist alternative, the transformative nature of democracy no longer takes place on the traditional right-left axis (however revisited). Today, if anything, the transformative dialectic of democracy sees on the scene a *systemic* opposition (now actual, now potential) between their forces of the 20th-century 'liberal-christian-social-democratic compromise' (of the right, left and centre, according to traditional language), on the one hand, and new political challengers and social claims (of the right, left and centre) still of uncertain determination. In other words, we are living in an era of political remaking within which a reconfiguration of the terms of the dialectic intrinsic to the *democratic fact* is underway. All this needs to be further observed, explored and more deeply investigated by questioning the transformative horizon within which the democracy of our time is stirring. This entails research work the scope of which is to recover and to consider the 'elementary' dialectic and conflict between pro-system and anti-system politics across the democratic field. Unless, more or less silently, one wants to hold on to the thesis of the 'end of history', even if this is only the 'end of the becoming of democracy': after all, there are times when democracy, in its political horizons, tends to be 'open' and others when it tends to be 'closed'.

The working hypothesis presented here starts from the conviction that the current social and political sciences have yet to understand the scope and the peculiar natures, in the current historical moment, of that changing *thing* that continues to maintain the constant *name* of democracy. And it is the intra-democratic conflict between pro-system and anti-system politics that, in one direction or another, will forge the character of the changing *thing-democracy* and the ever-fixed *name-democracy*. Therein lies the profound meaning of the *democratic fact*.

History will tell to what extent the future of democracy will be that of an 'open democracy' (i.e. politicised) or a 'closed democracy' (de-politicised). If we consider the symptoms of the crisis or the malaise of contemporary democracy as phenomena of the transformation that the *thing-democracy* has undergone since the 1970s (those symptoms that, e.g. have led us to speak of post-democracy or neoliberal democracy), 'open democracy' appears as the main 'unfulfilled promise' that a theory of democratic fact and the postulate of 'dual democracy' allow us to highlight: an 'unfulfilled promise' that Bobbio,<sup>59</sup> operating under the Schumpeterian postulate, could not even glimpse. A theory and analysis of contemporary democracy attentive to the transformative *historicity* and *politicity* of democracy should start from here. The crisis paradigm proves to be rhetorically satisfying and ideologically effective, but we have abused it: it has ended up generating a 'permanent crisis' syndrome that says everything and says nothing and fails to illuminate what is happening to that 'thing' that retains the 'name' of democracy. To tinker with the paradigm of the transformation of democracy is a difficult theoretical horizon to work on, one that may lead onto a slippery slope. But it is a perspective worth

working on. The diagnoses of today's democratic malaise are pertinent. However, they do present a serious limit: there is the risk of stopping at the symptoms, offering explanations focused on the surface of the critical phenomena of the democratic societies of our time, without a realisation that the democratic malaise is a constitutive part of the 'democratic fact' and its dialectics.

While democracy has a univocal and constant 'name', the 'thing' is polymorphous, metamorphic and transformative. In the end, democracy reveals its *indeterminacy*. By focusing on the postulates of democracy, this essay has simply sought to explore a working hypothesis, even at the risk of stumbling; but however bumpy the path and dim the light, the route must be taken. The epistemic exposure of democracy to the 'uncertainty principle' is a problematic and controversial decision, as is the Heisenberg principle itself. But that the act and instruments of observation change the observed phenomenon is a well-known and serious matter, even for social and political scientists. We can therefore say that attention to the postulates is more than well-deserved. The crisis of democracy reveals, first of all, a crisis of theory.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Crozier, M. J., Huntington, S. P., & Watanuki, J. 1975, *The crisis of democracy*, New York University Press, New York.
- 2 A recent example of such a narrative is Bremmer, I. 2023, *The power of crisis*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- 3 In this context, the theses (moreover, misunderstood) that appeared in an essay in 1993 and later developed in a book on the 'clash of civilisations' find unprecedented attention: Huntington, S. P. 1996, *The clash of civilisations and the remaking of world order*, Simon & Schuster, New York. Around Huntington's theses, a rift was created in the political-cultural debate in the liberal-democratic world.
- 4 The full '*opting out*' provided for in the European treaties.
- 5 If, in the late 1990s, one could still hear the statement 'We are all multiculturalists' (Glazer, N. 1997, *We are all multiculturalists now*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA), a few years later the liberal democrat Sartori (cf. Sartori, G. 2000, *Pluralismo, multiculturalismo ed estranei*, Rizzoli, Milano) questioned multiculturalism as a value or ideology under the doctrine of democratic pluralism. Since then, in no uncertain terms and with great resonance in the international press, there has been a crescendo of European political leaders declaring multiculturalism a failure: starting with German Chancellor Merkel, British Prime Minister Cameron and French President Sarkozy.
- 6 To the six stages or passages that we have recalled here, and to which the present crisis of democracy is normally traced, I would like to add the case of the Hispanic-Catalan conflict, which flared up in 2017, and which I have had occasion to frame in the terms of an 'intra-democratic' conflict between 'constituted democracy' (Spanish state) and 'constituent democracy' (Catalan independence). See website-blog 'Tempi Difficili' – gasparenevola.net.
- 7 Cf. Gellner, E. 1959, *Words and things*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth; Foucault, M. 1966, *Les mots et les Choses*, Gallimard, Paris.
- 8 Proof of this would be the democratic history in the *longue durée* and the fact that even in times of democratic malaise or democratic de-consolidation, democracy enjoys a stable 75% mass support worldwide. For a recent accommodation of this thesis: Wenzel, C. 2021, Why the future is democratic, *Journal of Democracy*, 2, 132–144, who explicitly argues a widespread orientation in the social sciences.

- 9 In post-democracy, 'the forms of democracy remain fully in place', but "politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times" (Crouch, C. 2004, *Post-democracy*, Polity Press, London, p. 6), thus emptying of power the *political* meaning that identifies democracy.
- 10 Cf. for example Dardot, P., & Laval, C. H. 2016, *Le cauchemar qui n'en finit pas*, Le Découverte, Paris.
- 11 For an overview of these symptoms of democratic malaise, see, for example Pharr, S. J., & Putnam, R. D. (Eds.). 2000, *Disaffected democracies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. On the growing disharmony between elites and citizenship, between 'centre' and 'peripheries': Lasch, C. 1995, *The revolution of the elites and the betrayal of democracy*, Norton & Company, New York; Guilluy, C. 2018, *No society. La fin de la classe moyenne occidentale*, Flammarion, Paris.
- 12 Rosanvallon, P. 1998, *Le peuple introuvable*, Gallimard, Paris, 10.
- 13 On these factors of the crisis or democratic malaise, cf. Nevola, G. 2024a, Socialismo e democrazia?, in Nevola, 2024c *La convivenza tra diversi*; Bauman, Z. 1999, *In search of politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA; Giddens, A. 1990, *The consequences of modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA; Norris, P. (Ed.). 1999, *Critical citizens*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Held, D., & McGrew, A. 2007, *Globalization/anti-globalization*, Polity Press, Cambridge; Inglehart, R., & Wenzel, C. 2005, *Modernization, cultural change and democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Brown, W. 2015, *Undoing the demos*, Zone Books, New York; D'Eramo, M. 2020, *Egemonia*, Feltrinelli, Milan.
- 14 Many are the formulas that have summarised this critical picture over the years: difficult democracy, democratic melancholy, democracy against itself, democracy without freedom, counter-democracy, consumer democracy, democracy without quality, disfigured democracy, democratic regression, democratic recession, de-democratisation, democratic de-consolidation, democratic disenchantment, democratic disillusionment, democratic disaffection, democratic malaise etc. Some of the works that use such formulas are quoted variously in the notes.
- 15 Cf. firstly, Macpherson, C. B. 1977, *The life and times of liberal democracy*, Oxford University Press, New York; but also Dunn, J. (Ed.). 1992, *Democracy: The unfinished journey, 508 BG to AD 1993*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Held, D. 1987, *Models of democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- 16 The transformative nature of the 'democratic thing' is grasped by Pareto, who acutely sees democracy as change, that is, as 'social movement', where the 'transformation from one state to another does not occur suddenly. Rather, there is continuous mutation similar to the process of evolutionary development in living creatures". Pareto, V. 2000, *The transformation of democracy*, Transactions Books, New Brunswick, p. 25 (orig. ed. 1920).
- 17 Bobbio, N. 1987, *The future of democracy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 26 (orig. ed. 1984).
- 18 The Schumpeterian postulate is dealt with in the next section.
- 19 In scientific, doctrinal, ideological and common sense terms.
- 20 Cf. for example, Macpherson, C. B. 1977, *The life and times of liberal democracy*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- 21 In this regard, the recognitions offered by Macpherson, C.B. 1977, *The life and times of liberal democracy*, Oxford University Press, New York; Dunn, J. (Ed.) 1992, *Democracy: The unfinished journey: 508 BG to AD 1993*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; D. Held, D. 1987, *Models of democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- 22 Cf. Schumpeter, J. A. 1992, *Capitalism, socialism & democracy*, Routledge, London (orig. ed. 1942). According to Wikipedia, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* would be, on the heels of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*,

- the third most cited book published before 1950 in the social sciences. *Si parva licet*, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism,\\_Socialism\\_and\\_Democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism,_Socialism_and_Democracy).
- 23 Cf. Sartori, G. 1968, Democracy, in *International encyclopedia of the social sciences*, Macmillan & Free Press, New York, vol. VI, pp. 112–121.
  - 24 In his famous speech *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes*.
  - 25 Cf. for example, Dunn, J. 1979, *Western political theory in the face of the future*, Cambridge University Press, New York; Dahl, R. D. 1989, *Democracy and its critics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
  - 26 It must be emphasised that, essentially, these are two versions of modern democracy that are nowadays usually labelled as ‘populist democracy’ (where populism is not placed outside the democratic camp) as opposed to ‘liberal democracy’, respectively. See Riker, W. H. 1982, *Liberalism against populism*, Freeman, San Francisco.
  - 27 At the time, it was above all from Marxist socio-economic theory that came discussion and claims on the subject of democracy, which challenged the claim of liberal-bourgeois theory to establish what and which is democracy. This is the aim, for example, of the democracy of the *Soviets* or factory and territory councils, which does not deny the institutions of representation but articulates and structures them according to other mechanisms and another conception of modern democracy. Exemplary, among others, are the analyses of Karl Korsch. It should be noted how this idea of democracy presents considerable affinities with the one promoted, for example in Italy, especially in the 1960s, by Capitini, A. 1969, *Omnicrazia: Il potere di tutti*, La Nuova Italia, Florence, and how it converges in various ways and measures with the rethinking of (representative) democracy in more recent times too.
  - 28 In his 1949 speech *On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship*.
  - 29 In one of his 1947 speeches to the House of Commons, he says “it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”.
  - 30 Emblematic of the political and cultural climate of this epoch, which also engulfed the social sciences, is the Berlin conference in 1960, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the ‘Congress for the Freedom of Culture’, dedicated to *La démocratie à l’épreuve du XX siècle*, where the programme deals with the defence of (liberal) democracy in its early 20th-century failure in much of Europe and with the reasons for the resistance to its dissemination in the period post-World War II, in the then-called Third World. Among the many participants (journalists, politicians and men of culture), there was a large representation of social and political scientists, historians, diplomats and political philosophers, including R. Aron, M. Berger, D. Fleichtheim, M. Freund, A. Garosci, S. Hook, G. Kennan, H. Kohn, K. Löwith, H. Lüthy, W. Rostow, A. Schlesinger Jr. and H. Seton-Watson. See Aron, R. (Édité par). 1960, *La démocratie à l’épreuve du XX siècle*, Calmann-Lewy, Paris.
  - 31 Note that only about sixty pages of the book’s 400 or so are devoted to the subject of democracy: one-sixth of the total.
  - 32 Cf. for example, Dunn, J. 1979, *Western political theory in the face of the future*, Cambridge University Press, New York; Dahl, R. D. 1989, *Democracy and its critics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
  - 33 Let us leave aside here Schumpeterian assumptions on the anthropological level, of human nature, as well as the fact that his analysis of the ‘classical’ doctrine is rather casual about the complex relationship between the ideal and real dimensions of democracy.
  - 34 Schumpeter, J. A. 1992, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Routledge, London, p. 250.
  - 35 Schumpeter, J. A. 1992, *Capitalism, socialism & democracy*, Routledge, London, p. 269.
  - 36 This is in accordance, as Schumpeter himself points out, with the techno-structures (bureaucratic and techno-scientific apparatuses), with the set of ‘power elites’ (beginning with the economic and lineage elites), and with the help of the machines of mass

- culture, educational agencies, communication, information and entertainment. Wright Mills, Ch. 1956, *The power elite*, Oxford University Press, New York, is still a reference in this regard.
- 37 Cf. Nevola, G. 2024b, Laicità della democrazia e riconoscimento reciproco tra credenti e ‘variamente credenti’, in Nevola, 2024c *La convivenza tra diversi*.
  - 38 In this respect, the articulate definition of democracy proposed by Dahl, R. D. (1971) is exemplary, a definition (now risen to the status of political glossary) that forms the basis of all the author’s analyses of democracy, starting from Dahl, R. D. 1961, *Who governs*, Yale University Press, New Haven: An empirical research that represents an ill-concealed, pointed, supposing and not a little captious critique of Wright Mills, C. 1956, *The power elite*, Oxford University Press, New York. Dahl’s critique is part of the important debate between the neo-elitist school and the neo-pluralist school, now forgotten, but which deserves to be reconsidered in all its aspects, including those empirical and methodological.
  - 39 Cf. Bobbio, N. 1987, *The future of democracy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
  - 40 For economy of space, it is not possible to develop this topic here.
  - 41 Cf. especially Eisenstadt, S. N. 1999, *Paradoxes of democracy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
  - 42 For all, see Riker, W. H. 1982, *Liberalism against populism*, Freeman, San Francisco; Dahl, R. D. 1989, *Democracy and its critics*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
  - 43 It is the theoretical line that has had among its most influential 20th-century progenitors, for example Schumpeter, Kelsen, Popper, Plamentatz, Sartori, Bobbio and Dahl.
  - 44 In its two variants, republicanism and communitarianism. On the differences, regarding the vision of society and the subject, between republicanism-communitarianism and democratic liberalism, refer to Nevola, G. 2016, Ripensare la cultura politica del senso civico. Tra paradigma liberale e paradigma comunitario-repubblicano, *Rivista Trimestrale di Scienza dell’Amministrazione. Studi di Teoria e Ricerca Sociale*, 1–37, [https://rtsa.eu/RTSA\\_3\\_2016\\_Nevola.pdf](https://rtsa.eu/RTSA_3_2016_Nevola.pdf).
  - 45 Cf. e.g. Bachrach, P. 1967, *The theory of democratic elitism*, Little Brown & Co., Boston; Allum, P. 1991, *Democrazia Reale*, Liviana, Padua; Bachrach, P., & Botwinick, A. 1992, *Power and empowerment: A radical theory of participatory democracy*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia; Manin, B. 1992, *La democrazia dei moderni*, Anabasi, Milan; Dunn, J. 2005, *Setting the people free*, Atlantic Books, London; Przeworski, A. 2018, *Why bother with elections*, Polity Press, Cambridge; Cagé, J. 2018, *Le prix de la démocratie*, Arthème Fayard, Paris.
  - 46 Although the postulate is sometimes more or less softened today compared to Schumpeterian ‘political realism’, as works such as those by Dahl or Bobbio exemplify.
  - 47 On this, a cornerstone remains in Marshall, T. H. 1950, *Citizenship and social class: And other essays*, Cambridge University Press, London.
  - 48 In our understanding, the concept of the ‘political field’ owes a debt to Bourdieu’s sociological theory and Laclau’s political theory.
  - 49 A different formulation of the dual conception of democracy is in Nevola, G. 2024b, Laicità della democrazia e riconoscimento reciproco tra credenti e ‘variamente credenti’, in Nevola, 2024c *La convivenza tra diversi*.
  - 50 In the analysis offered by Eisenstadt, as we have seen, there are two conceptions: The constitutional and the participatory.
  - 51 Cf. in particular Laclau, E. 2005, *On populist reason*, Verso, London, 2005.
  - 52 On the difference between antagonism and agonism, see the political theory of Mouffe, C. 2005, *The democratic paradox*, Verso, London, where an attempt is made to retranslate the logic of friend-enemy conflict analysed by Carl Schmitt into a pluralistic democratic logic, freed from the reductionism of liberal democratic political theory that resolves it into pure proceduralism or consensualism.

- 53 Eisenstadt, S. N. 1999, *Paradoxes of democracy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p. 44.
- 54 On 'conditional analysis' refer to Nevola, G. 2007, *Democrazia, Costituzione, Identità*, Utet-De Agostini, Novara.
- 55 Eisenstadt, S. N. 1999, *Paradoxes of democracy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p. 94.
- 56 Cf. Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (Eds.) 1967, Cleavages structures, party systems, and voter alignments, in Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (Eds.), *Party systems and voter alignments: Cross-national perspectives*, Free Press, New York.
- 57 More difficult to place in this summary profile is the 'radical' or 'extreme' right wing of early 20th-century Europe (fascism, national socialism), which here we keep on the sidelines.
- 58 The role, function and political identity of *systemic* (or 'anti-systemic') *alternatives* from which left-wing forces had historically drawn their political energy.
- 59 Cf. Bobbio, N. 1987, *The future of democracy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

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### 3    **Emergency politics and de-democratization in the age of authoritarian neoliberalism**

*Fabio de Nardis*

#### **Political emergency and centralization of power**

Economic defaults, natural disasters, wars, acts of terrorism, and epidemics now seem to be the hallmarks of contemporary societies, requiring democratic governments to act with speed to deal with emergencies. “Necessity” becomes the ordering principle of politics, and decisions are made “in haste” (White 2020, 22). This prompts us to reflect on how socially binding decisions are made in contemporary democracies today. The premise is that in a democracy, politics is formally sovereign and can make decisions that are the product of agreements made in or with parliament. This sovereignty does not imply omnipotence, however, in the sense that every decision must be made within the framework of constitutional compatibilities that outline the formal and substantive inviolability of individual rights.

Given national differences, the pandemic emergency, for example, prompted some governments to take decisions that went directly to restricting the spaces of freedom associated with certain fundamental rights – such as those of mobility, assembly, work, leisure, and social relations – so much so that in some cases it prompted some to discern a potential confusion between a “state of emergency” and a “state of exception”, which leads us at the very least to problematize the real source of the emergency powers granted to governments. We are not here to question the merit of certain measures, but rather the way in which they are deliberated.

When we speak of a “state of emergency”, we are referring to those conjunctures in which governments can put into practice behaviors that speed up decision-making in order to cope with unforeseen events that require immediate administrative action. These are mostly technical measures that do not undermine the democratic resilience of the system, responding rather to a conjunctural need for immediacy of government intervention. In contrast, a “state of exception” provides for a momentary suspension of the legal system, subverting the parameters of power management provided in the rule of law. Exceptional powers split procedures, and the mechanisms of government become increasingly informal and politically unaccountable (White 2020, 21). All democratic systems consider this possibility to be applied in borderline cases, such as in a war or in situations of public disorder that may generate a subversion of the established order. And yet, there are several (sometimes grotesque) interpretations in which it has long been noted



that in post-1989 Western democracies a kind of permanent “state of exception” has been realized that is destined to progressively empty the spaces and meanings of democratic politics (Agamben 2003). With this contribution, we do not intend to enter into the merits of a debate that has been all too trivialized in social network pseudo-polemics. The risk is of introducing into the same cauldron ridiculous conspiracy, denialist, and anti-scientist positions, which we clearly reject. We prefer some critical reflections, in our opinion far more pertinent, with respect to the reduction of participatory and democratic spaces that we have been recording for at least two decades, that is, long before the syndemic involved the entire planet.

Regardless of the recent pandemic emergency, the so-called substitute techniques, that is, all those legal devices that provide for the management of emergencies through non-ordinary technicalities that nonetheless take on the features of ordinariness over time seem to have been prevailing for years, even in the exercise of government. These procedures take the form of “executive emergency powers”, which are not the result of delegation by parliaments, and which Clinton Rossiter well distinguished from so-called legislative emergency powers, which are instead vested in the executive through specific legislation (Rossiter 1963, 290).

In some respects, the impression is that endemic crises have generated a frequent indistinction between the socio-legal concepts of “emergency” and “exception”. In the case of the pandemic, which we use in this context only as a paradigmatic example, the fear of contagion, in addition to a media (and political) rhetoric that often likened the fight against COVID-19 to a real war, meant that the need to adopt emergency measures translated into real “special powers” granted to the Prime Minister’s Office. In Italy, for example, the government concentrated the power of intervention on itself, maintaining it even in the months of pandemic reflux, when there would probably have been conditions for a broader parliamentary discussion. The same was realized at the decentralized level, where regional governors personalized the management of the emergency, sometimes going into conflict with the national government. This new custom that centralizes and, at the same time, personalizes decision-making thus tends to standardize a state of quasi-exceptionality.

Undoubtedly, national governments have been confronted with an unprecedented situation, but we nevertheless want to problematize the pre-pandemic propensity to empty parliaments of their legislative and representative function, which, as the recent literature on depoliticization processes shows (de Nardis 2017), characterizes a practice that connotes political action in the age of neoliberalism. Indeed, the centralization of decision-making has connoted the modes of government in the last two decades. The pandemic emergency has only radicalized an already ongoing trend of concentration of power and substantial deprivation of parliament of its legislative function, often turning them into little more than advisory bodies.

In the Italian case of the pandemic emergency, following the Council of Ministers’ Resolution of January 31, 2020, by which a “state of emergency” for health risk was declared, later extended twice, on July 21 and October 7 of the same year, citizens were inundated with emergency measures, at all administrative levels, geared toward a radical deprivation of individual freedoms. The failure to parliamentarize the emergency has often been criticized, especially with respect to the

practice of the Dpcm (Prime Minister's Resolutions), which are in fact completely outside the political control of parliament and the control of legitimacy by the Constitutional Court. The choice to operate in this way has almost prefigured a kind of "war normalization" typical of a "state of exception" (Covella 2020), endorsed among other things by the mass media, which has often developed paramilitary language (think of the call for the use of the armed forces to manage the lockdown or the rhetoric of "curfew" to define a banal and justified blockade of evening circulation in clubs to prevent the spread of the virus). Partial restriction of freedoms, centralization, and personalization of political power are thus the traits that characterize this historical phase in which emergency politics seems to have become a salient feature of contemporary democracies, which have long been infiltrated not only by authoritarian rhetoric and mentality well represented by some new populisms but also by the restriction of participation spaces.

It is the Sovereign who decides on the state of exception, wrote Carl Schmitt (1976). In the face of emergencies, the rule of law retreats, leaving the field open to the true sovereign, the person alone in charge. Yet, in a democracy, even within an emergency dimension, it is always necessary to balance powers, and emergencies always produce a potential trade-off between rights, in which the right to safety tends to prevail over the others (Baldwin 2005). In this case, the right to health (health security) rightly played a super-ordinate role over other constitutional rights. A need also expressed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, who explicitly referred to the risk of the health emergency turning "into a catastrophe for human rights".<sup>1</sup>

A reflection on the meaning of emergency policies is therefore especially pertinent at a time when the processes of economic globalization and the (often catastrophic) effects on the ecosystem of a given development model require democratic governments to manage unforeseen conjunctures by implementing reactive practices with respect to the recurrence of critical junctures. Such crises take on a function that is both transformative and conservative. In emergency management, on the one hand, new actors, new practices, and new procedures come into play that often stabilize within an adaptive dimension of social and institutional resilience; on the other hand, new emergency policies, as resilient, mostly operate to protect and reconfirm pre-existing balances of power (Arienzo 2006). Governments also use emergency policies to strengthen themselves through the use and abuse of non-ordinary powers. They emphasize the executive over the legislative moment by also disincentivizing and repressing social practices of political participation.

We are thus faced with the situation that, in unsuspected times, was well identified by Michel Foucault through the theoretical category of "governmentality", understood as a very specific, albeit very complex, form of power, which has the population as its target, the political economy as its main form of knowledge, and security devices as its essential technical tools (Foucault 2016).

In the logic of neoliberal governments, the nexus between security and freedom assumes a diriment role. The absolute freedom necessary for the unfolding of a certain political economy determines uncertainties, risks, and cyclical emergencies given by the systemic fragility of the capitalist mode of wealth production

and accumulation. Such unpredictability generates fear and social anxiety, which have become the two sentiments on which the dimension of political dialectics and the legitimization of power in contemporary societies is articulated, favoring the activation of procedures of control and coercion that act as a kind of counterpart to freedom (Foucault 2010). For this reason, in an essay devoted to the crisis of democratic conditions, reasoning about the nexus between emergence and neoliberalism makes sense to us.

Fear of the unforeseen (and generally of the migrant, the terrorist, the criminal, and the virus) and the consequent militarization become, among other things, two important aspects of politics in the age of emergencies and the depoliticization of governmental processes (Ahmed 2003; Booth and Wheeler 2009; Papandreou 2013; Wodack 2015). “Necessity” breeds centralization of power and militarization, as law enforcement agencies become the guarantors of security in the face of threat (Scheppelle 2010, 133–134). Severe restrictions are imposed not only on freedom of mobility but also on participation and protest, increasing surveillance and anticipatory violence against those who opt for non-institutional forms of participation.

In this essay, such transformations of democratic conditions in the West, which signal a clear process of de-democratization, to use an expression of Charles Tilly (2017), will be connected, on the one hand, to the aforementioned dynamics of de-politicization – namely, how institutional politics acts today within the confines of neoliberal governance (de Nardis 2017); on the other hand, to those dynamics well described by the now prolific literature that has problematized the concept of “authoritarian neoliberalism”, understood as that set of state strategies through which the parameters of the neoliberal system are kept safe from any possible popular pressure. We thus assume that neoliberalism takes shape and is reinforced, first, through coercive state practices aimed at disciplining, marginalizing, and often criminalizing oppositional social forces; second, through the legal-administrative state apparatuses that limit the avenues through which neoliberal policies can be questioned and challenged (Tansel 2017, 2). In essence, there are thus two elements that qualify authoritarian neoliberalism: on the one hand, it determines elements of novelty with respect to the traditional way of acting of states in a context of advanced capitalism (Poulantzas 1978); on the other hand, through such an analytical category, we identify that qualitative change intrinsic to the illiberal propensity of neoliberalism. In connecting democratic crisis, depoliticization, and authoritarian neoliberalism, we assume that the latter operates through preventive disciplining mechanisms that isolate and protect neoliberal public policies through legal, administrative, and coercive instruments aimed at shielding the policymaker from all forms of social dissent (Bruff 2014). From this point of view, it is apparent how neoliberalism departs from classical liberal thought based on the idea of the minimal state or, at most, arbiter of the processes of free market deployment. Indeed, neoliberal policies need a strong state and administrative system, but a weak democracy in terms of the relationship between institutions and citizens. As Bruff notes (2014, 123), in the age of authoritarian neoliberalism, governance techniques are not only reactive but also preventive, framing the public policy system

within a kind of permanent state of necessity. The initial reference to emergency policies thus comes into play as a symbolic (and rhetorical) tool, functional in the reproduction of such a frame.

### **De-democratization and depoliticization**

By the concept of depoliticization, we mean the ways in which neoliberalism acts on systems of government in contemporary democracies. Through it, decision-making is effectively stripped of its eminently political character, and political actors become less accountable for the choices that influence the regulation of societies. (Burnham 2001; 2017; d’Albergo and Moini 2017; de Nardis 2017; Foster et al. 2014; Hay 2014; Flinders and Wood 2014; Fawcett and Marsh 2014). In this context, economic and cultural processes acquire the characteristics of necessity or even inevitability. Depoliticization asserts itself in various ways. In the European context, for example, we can observe “governmental”, “discursive”, and more generally “social” depoliticization (Hay 2007).

The “governmental depoliticization” is perhaps the most obvious and consists of the shift in decision-making from elective arenas to places outside those of representation, fictitiously presented as neutral (Flinders 2008): central banks, independent regulators, agencies of various kinds (Burnham 1999; Hay 2007; Kettel 2008), and privatized utility companies (Flinders and Buller 2006a, 2006b). These shifts reveal depoliticization as one of the effects of a kind of meta-governance, which re-regulates governance (Jessop 2011; Fawcett and Marsh 2014).

Another shift in power is implemented through decisions by national governments and parliaments for the benefit of higher-scale actors, such as the bodies but also the (intergovernmental) procedures of the European Union (e.g., the Fiscal Compact) and the so-called troika (European Council, European Commission, and European Central Bank), and produces various forms of international standards, the implementation of which is delegated to technical, thus extra-political, figures and instruments. Think of the requirement for EU governments to have public finance decisions approved by the Commission in its dual technical and political capacity before presenting them to parliaments; or think of IMF and WB conditionalities, constraints from WTO agreements (Flinders and Buller 2006b), as well as other sources of legal regulation from bi- or multi-lateral forms of international agreement (Huggins 2015); as well as to the imposition of Good Governance regulatory models in East-European transition countries to enhance technocratic fine-tuning, or to sanctions imposed indirectly by rating agencies and global financial speculation operators in relation to public finance policies. All of these shifts concentrate powers outside state politics and also urge a de-empowerment of representative political actors (Burnham 2001; Kettel 2008; Wood and Flinders 2014).

Another aspect of governmental depoliticization can be traced to the adoption of meta-decisions that make it impossible to make other decisions later, tying the hands of policymakers (Flinders and Buller 2006a). One example is the constitutionalization of the balanced budget obligation that depoliticizes national economic

policy, whose task is reduced to monitoring and regulating the process with measures that meet predetermined standards (e.g., austerity policies).

Technicization is thus an important part of the depoliticization of governments, with the assignment of regulatory effects and funding transfers to assessment technologies or technical procedures to support policy decisions that make decisions evidence-based and removed from ideologies and social pressures. Think of “Regulatory Impact Analysis”, or “data driven decision-making”, based on the idea that decision-makers in the public sphere cannot ignore the ongoing movement in the commercial sector (data-driven innovation). “Technique”, falsely presented as neutral, becomes the new neoliberal philosophy, and technicians become its protagonists, sometimes called upon to play directly depoliticized policy roles, as in governments of national unity legitimized in the name, as it happens, of exceptional emergency situations. In these circumstances, the representation of interests is no longer relevant, but what matters to markets and supranational institutions are the skills and reliability of governments.

By contrast, “discursive depoliticization” has a fundamental outlet (Flinders and Buller 2006a): the convergence of preferences toward a single cognitive construction of reality (frame for public actions). It is no coincidence that the prevailing paradigm in a liberal political economy has been narrated (not without some trivialization) in the form of a single mindset or single thought, manifesting a clear cultural hegemony of finance-driven transnational capitalism. Market-oriented public policies become compulsory responses and rational alternatives to the limits of development as it was for the Keynesian compromise are lacking.

Especially in Europe, the tarnishing of values and programmatic differentiations between left and right is evidence of this kind of depoliticization. Ideological convergence is also aided by the communication of imaginaries and powerful brands of knowledge (the influence of pre-rational emotional states involving individuals, policymakers, and epistemic communities on the acceptance or rejection of a political idea) and seductiveness, that is, a specific normative force exerted in indicating what to aspire to and how (Jessop 2009, 2014; Sum and Jessop 2013). These are forms of communication and meaning-making based on appeals or slogans (Wood 2015) that refer to a supposed (good) common sense imbued with moral or ethical values. Consensus is thus mobilized around assumptions whose social acceptability cannot be questioned and thus legitimizes unquestionable paradigms. The most prevalent highlight various aspects of the primacy of regulation through the market, such as anything that is narrated as efficient, flexible, innovative, and intelligent. These appeals can guide, legitimize, and incentivize both public actions and individual and collective behavior. This also applies to what is described as unacceptable and the object of stigma, that is, everything public (public debt, social spending, public administration, social conflict).

In the neoliberal era, the contradictions of regulation become simple technical problems over predefined processes managed by experts (Swyngedouw 2011; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Actions are addressed through the construction of horizons of meaning presented in the form of “public truth” by nonpolitical

actors (Jessop 2011, 2014). The emerging actors of depoliticization are not only the creators and disseminators of expert knowledge (gurus, technicians of international organizations, consultants) but are also the ultimate beneficiaries of these transformations, that is, those who place themselves favorably in the current distributional asymmetries, especially corporations (Hay 2014, 302). These directly benefit from a specific “social depoliticization” (Flinders and Wood 2014) and a redefinition of the boundary between the political and the nonpolitical (Jessop 2014, 217). “Social depoliticization” thus consists of transferring the power to address issues of collective interest to the private spheres of the market. This shift reduces not only public debate but also the political potential of social issues and conflicts (especially those in which rights are claimed), labeled as traditionalist, antiquated, ideological, or fundamentalist (Swyngedouw 2011), through a reframing of the stakes in terms of issues that can be resolved through so-called innovative practices.

Economic actors have always been concerned with influencing decisions on which the characteristics of their environment depend. This is the reason why the practices of consultation, lobbying, and political financing have been extensively analyzed by sociology and political science, which theorized – even with normative intentions – first neo-corporativism, then the notion of governance. The season of governance was initiated at the same time as a new market orientation of public policy and saw the formal inclusion of business in cooperative processes and public-private partnerships (Willems et al. 2017). The latter have produced both business-friendly regulations and the isomorphism of de-politicized public action with the market and its actors. This practice is usually easily identified when the focus is on a local scale. The representation of cities as actors with a collective decision-making system – of common or perceived common interests, integration mechanisms, internal and external representation of the collective subject, and capacity for innovation, operationally translated into a regulatory framework underlying metropolitan governance reforms – is in fact built on the business model. The city of strategic planning is in search of a vision and leadership capable of calculating cost-benefit, assessing risks and opportunities, and strengths and weaknesses, and orienting itself to competition and partnership.

In the construction of the city as a strategic environment and actor in the context of globalization and crisis, cognitive and normative models are produced by applied knowledge and skills, especially in companies. Market-oriented policy instruments since the 1990s – marketing, branding, strategic planning, etc. – have more recently been updated through reference to business-derived imaginaries, which are already making the metamorphosis from innovative ideas to models in the early stages of institutionalization. Think of the Smart City paradigm, the functionality or service economy, which aims to replace the sale of goods with the sale of their use, such as car sharing. Think also of the narratives and practices of Social Investment, Social Entrepreneurship, and Social Innovation. These models – simultaneously economic, cultural, and political – are realized through relationships between society, the market, and politics that go beyond the old public governance. Businesses, including “social” ones, seek and cultivate new markets and secure them through relationships with local organizations and governments. In so doing, they seek to



drive collective action through specific ideational capacity. Pro-business regulations aim to gain consensus and legitimacy by presenting themselves as capable of defining patented solutions to collective problems through the market and technologies (environment, quality of life, economic development, participation, mobility, social inclusion, etc.). These are situated within larger systems of meaning, often designed by world-renowned gurus and transferred to transnational ITC companies, adapted to local markets, recognized, and institutionalized by supranational and national policies. The connotation of inevitability and naturalization of these technical solutions resides in their being manifestly rational and preferable to models represented as ineffective and sources of waste and malaise, both individually and collectively.

These messages are conveyed through seductive representations of a desirable society (smart, sustainable, inclusive, happy). The hegemonic functionality of these imaginaries is expressed in a form of preference shaping in which the interests of the firm, or the organization of community action in the form of the firm, enable the achievement of general environmental and social goals, sometimes presented in the form of the common good or general community interest. In this way, it is also possible to bring back, within the horizons of the market, the reformulation of rights that were once the subject of conflicting claims. The framework tends to overlap and mutually reinforce each other with that of the European level of integration. Issues of collective interest are (re)defined as factors of productivity, competitiveness, social cohesion, and resilience. The list of areas affected by this form of privatized governance would be long: education and skilled labor, security, environment, and quality of life, health, and heritage and cultural vitality of places are, for example, reclassified as assets that bring competitive advantages.

The reduction of complexity through these images constitutes an original mediation between general and private interests, citizenship and profits. In this way, governmental depoliticization is fueled by new forms of politicization of market actors, who present themselves as capable of solving social problems, or by having those who want to address public problems take the form and culture of a market actor. By taking responsibility for producing and especially for designing these forms of regulation and/or intervention, businesses politicize themselves, as they play a role not only in supporting policy but also in replacing policy. For example, in the Smart City, businesses not only provide ways to determine how to address individual and collective needs but also provide strategic management models to coordinate the optimization of local resources and the allocation of European funds. Both are typically political functions that are, however, being privatized, not unlike other contemporary practices, such as corporate self-regulation, soft law production, corporate social responsibility, and corporate citizenship.

With depoliticization, the functions and space of politics do not disappear, but governance processes only become less transparent (Burnham 2017; Foster et al. 2014) and, at the same time, faster and cheaper for elites. If science and technology say there is no alternative, there is no point in negotiating in parliaments and organized interests, so there are a growing variety of issues removed from the risks of assembly ballot and the judgment of the electorate. In this way, the same processes

of depoliticization, presented by many institutional actors as partly inevitable and partly desirable forms of rationalization (Hay 2007; Flinders and Wood 2014), especially in times of crisis, are naturalized in the public sphere, as they are associated with the reduction of political conflict.

To eliminate or reduce the political character of actions, or to assert governance in which political decisions are made without giving the appearance of doing so, is not to reduce regulatory requirements but to produce them in new ways. The effects of actions do not cease to be political since they consist of the selective allocation of tangible and intangible values. Precisely by considering these effects, we can attempt to formulate an answer to the question of why contemporary forms of depoliticization have been successful. It would be difficult to understand why this is a dominant and culturally orthodox model today without relating it to the contextual neoliberalization and hegemony created by economic elites through the value and belief system of the neoliberal paradigm (Foster et al. 2014). Indeed, depoliticization is the result of a coherent meta-governance that is functional to a political strategy (Jessop 2014). Market-oriented public action uses it as a specific institutional and discursive resource that allows wealth accumulation strategies to take the form of a hegemonic political project (Moini 2015, 37). This is especially the case at times of roll-out (Peck and Tickell 2002) and in the consolidation of neoliberalism, where the central issue is not to cut and dismantle the public sphere, but to construct or adapt the extra-economic conditions of accumulation (Burnham 1999); for example, not only with innovation and competitiveness but also with austerity prescriptions.

The reduction of the political to the economic (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014, 8), in addition to facilitating the functioning of markets, is a component of neoliberal political rationality and governability (Foster et al. 2014). Depoliticization is useful to elites, but it also finds acceptance through growing disinterest, disaffection, and popular distrust of politics and politicians (represented as privileged, incompetent, and corrupt). The reduction of spaces devoted to sociopolitical conflict, that is, not traced back to the rhetorical Manichaeism brought forth by the standard bearers of anti-politics and the new populisms, is thus embedded within an anthropological framework and, as we have shown, starts from the construction of an articulated ideological superstructure perpetrated also by the public apparatuses of nation-states. In this context, a reflection on the notion of “authoritarian neoliberalism” that I introduced in the previous section thus becomes pertinent.

### **3. De-democratization and authoritarian neoliberalism**

Having assessed the connection between democratic crisis and processes of neoliberalization, it seems useful to introduce the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, which, in our opinion, well summarizes the historical correlation between authoritarianism, understood as the restriction of democratic conditions, the affirmation of the neoliberal political project, and the growth of populist phenomena in the West. The instability of neoliberal economic cycles periodically seems to undermine the model of value extraction based on market- and finance-oriented policies



so much so that some scholars have in the past speculated about the possibility of a transition to a new order or phase of capitalism beyond neoliberal parameters (Duménil and Lévy 2011, 326). Yet, after every crisis, we witness hyperactivism by national governments that implement public interventions aimed at restructuring the system through austerity policies and liquidity injections into the banking system. Neoliberalism thus survives through public action programs that protect it from any exogenous and endogenous shocks. This finding prompts us to reflect on the institutional resilience of this model of economic and political governance and the mechanisms through which it reproduces itself, beyond critical junctures and frequent manifestations of popular opposition that are disciplined, marginalized, and often criminalized.

Of course, the use of violent means of institutional disciplining in defense of the system of capitalist accumulation is not a neoliberal invention, but there is no doubt that such modalities are partly implicit in the political project pursued by the globalization of markets, which has been imposed, especially in the 1990s, partly through the frequent use of political repression (Mitchell 1999). The limitation of popular resistance and thus the reduction of the spaces of contentious politics, with the aim of isolating and protecting neoliberal public policies, is an established technique of governance in modern capitalist states. This allows us to challenge the idea that, with neoliberalism, the state takes a step back from managing the economy. On the contrary, it is very much present and fuels its development, often supporting processes of de-democratization. This is because, before establishing itself as an economic project, neoliberalism takes shape as an eminently social and political project. As Gamble (2001, 127) reminds us, the neoliberal course should be understood simultaneously as a form of political economy and as an ideological system.

In this sense, we can say that the category of authoritarian neoliberalism points to a system of strategies implemented by states to foster capitalist accumulation that, on the one hand, exaggerate the structural historical tendencies of capitalist political organization (Tansel 2017) and, on the other hand, deploy a series of devices unlocking the extraction of value in the form of capitalism at the expense of democracy, understood as that system of equal, broad, protected, and mutually binding consultation that also contemplates a space for protest-type forms of participation (Amoore et al. 1997; Tilly 2017). Specifically, we can argue that, by the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, we mean to emphasize that it is a spectrum of disciplining strategies, ranging from more explicit demonstrations of the coercive power of the state (e.g., police repression and surveillance) to more diffuse but equally concrete manifestations related to administrative and legal mechanisms that reinforce existing power relations and inequalities (Tansel 2017, 6). Capitalism in its neoliberal version comes into friction with the logic of the functioning of democratic politics, allowing itself to be traversed by authoritarian tendencies and practices that match well with the rhetoric expressed by the new contemporary populisms (Fraser 2015).

There are now several contributions that focus on the role played by social and political institutions in support of a society built around the value of inequality,

as presupposed in neoliberal logic (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2004; Harvey 2005; Moini 2020). It has, in fact, been developed since the late 1930s, only to impose itself in the late 1970s as a social, rather than economic, framework, lashing out against the Keynesian concept of social welfare and the implicit idea of a necessary connection between economic freedom and political freedom. A theory of individual action, then, before a model of economic action (Hayek 1944; Mises 1949), built around the idea of a society composed of the coexistence of competing individuals. In this context, the very concepts of political freedom and democracy are subordinated to the logic of the free market, which exists and subsists even in the absence of democratic freedoms, as is clear from the work of Friedman, the greatest popularizer of neoliberal thought (Friedman 1962). In one of his memoirs, he devotes a chapter to his ties with Pinochet's Chile, the first real historical testing ground for neoliberalism, justifying them by asserting that a dictatorial society nevertheless offers good leeway for individual initiative and the private sphere of life, around which the concept of economic freedom is substantiated (Friedman and Friedman 1999, 595).

Back to "authoritarian neoliberalism", it draws inspiration mainly from Stuart Hall's reflections on "authoritarian populism" connected to Thatcherism (Hall 1985, 1988, 2011) and Poulantzas' on "authoritarian statism" (Poulantzas 1978). Both, from only partially different perspectives, show how the very concept of authoritarianism need to be linked not only to the exercise of violence (repression and surveillance) but also to a kind of reconfiguration of the state and, in general, of political power in order to isolate certain public policies, protecting them from the practices of organized social dissent. To do this, it is necessary to construct a capitalism that is also popular, to use an expression dear to Margaret Thatcher, that is, introjected into the minds of subjects shaped around an individualistic and competitive anthropology. As it emerges in the forms of discursive depoliticization, a certain economic course must therefore be justified by the dual rhetoric of "innovation" and "necessity". To do this, the politics of interests are not needed, but naturalized technology proposed as the only solution to public problems is sufficient. Coercion and consensus should therefore not be seen as two necessarily opposing terms. Sometimes coercion is constructed through the tools of consensus and hegemonic thinking, presenting itself tacitly in the form of non-dissent under the formula of silence-assent.

### **Liberal logic versus democratic logic**

We should ask: is a certain amount of authoritarianism compatible with liberalism and democracy? Our idea is that it is hardly ascribable to the democratic experience, but it is not entirely incompatible with liberal logic. In order to better understand the undoubtedly controversial issue, it is necessary to separate two terms that have too often been used as synonyms even by distinguished scholars and political scientists. Ideological confusion over the very concept of democracy occurs, among other things, in the emphasis on an almost unlimited idea of freedom. Even the debate on emergency policies in the pandemic era is partly vitiated

by this interpretive fallacy. Lockdowns, vaccines, compulsory green passes, and closing of activities after a certain hour were seen by many people as illiberal and undemocratic measures because they went directly against the spaces of individual agency. Indeed, all these measures, justified by the health emergency, adversely affect portions of individual freedom, clashing with the logic of classical liberalism, but that is not why they can be considered anti-democratic on their merits, because democracy itself is based on limiting individual freedoms in the name of the general interest of society. Liberalism becomes historically liberal-democratic when it is combined with the idea of legal limitation to protect collective interests and the construction of a sociopolitical system based on the balance between potentially opposing social interests. The crisis of the politics of interests in favor of the politics of (individual) identities deconstructs the democratic component within the historical balance between liberalism and democracy. The point we have tried to focus attention on, therefore, does not (or at least not always) lie in the nature of the measures, which are often necessary in cases of social emergency, but rather in the decision-making methods through which such measures are taken by governments. For this reason, we have tried to connect the processes of democratic involution with those of de-politicization and authoritarian neoliberalism. In both cases we see a strengthening of the Executives to the detriment. On the one hand, of the political representation of interests; on the other hand, of the moments of even non-institutional participation against which the dual rhetorical and repressive mechanisms of states in the age of authoritarian neoliberalism have long been occurring.

In writing this, we do not intend to deny liberalism its merit, namely, the vindication of individual liberties in a historical era when they were denied. Rather, we wish to bring out its limitation, in our view traceable in the conception of individuality understood as historical hypostasis. The very idea of society is contemplated by classical liberalism as something that comes after the formally free individual regardless of his social relations. Individual rights and property rights themselves are conceived as ahistorical data almost connoted naturalistically (Cerroni 1996). The idea of the equality of humankind, on which the main democratic theories are modeled, was not a pressing concern of historical liberalism, which at most limited itself to the albeit fundamental claim of the legal recognition of human dignity. The liberal formula that “the law is equal for all” is not necessarily connected to the oft-betrayed democratic formula that “all are equal before the law”. The very concept of liberal-democracy represents precisely the encounter of the liberal tradition with a system of egalitarian instances that are not in themselves implicit in the classical liberal tradition, starting with universal suffrage and the equality of women. The same “rules of the game”, which are indeed a liberal carryover, were not originally designed to normalize the social and egalitarian demands coming from democratic, republican, and secular-socialist movements. It is no accident that everywhere liberalism, while supporting elements of economic innovation that are always market-oriented, retains an essentially traditionalist soul, usually distrustful of processes of extending democratic conditions, thus *de facto* oriented toward the defense of the status quo ante. Hence it is also possible to explain the

historical weakness of European liberalism in the face of the emergence of historical fascism and, today, the tendency on the part of European far-right movements to make themselves advocates of demands related to individual freedom along the lines of No Vax or No Green Pass. Having said that, we in no way intend to assert that there is collusion or historical continuity between liberalism and fascism; it would be wrong to think so and dishonest to assert so; nor do we mean, on the other hand, that those who have protested against certain pandemic containment measures are necessarily neo-fascists, but we simply note an actual tendency on the part of the European right to politicize certain “libertarian” instances.

The pandemic experience is a good context for analysis and experimentation to investigate how contemporary democracies work because it represents an intervening variable against which all nations have had to react by converging on similar practices, imposed by a kind of law of necessity that leads us toward a theoretical reconsideration of the relationship between citizens and between citizens and institutions (Walker 2020; Alteri et al. 2021). A kind of natural experiment on a global scale that imposed not only emergency interventions but also a restructuring of governance mechanisms, tax regimes, labor policies, and public opinion (Poiars Maduro and Kahn 2020).

During emergencies, a debate often opens, especially among legal experts, about the risks of a certain hypertrophy of executive power to the detriment of democratic values and human rights. As mentioned at the outset, emergencies induce governments to act quickly by implementing policies of necessity that often go well beyond the specific juncture and are also used by the executives to consolidate their own power. In a sense, the pandemic experience represents a veritable handbook on the issue of executive overreach (Scheppele and Pozen 2020), that is, the tendency of some governments to go far beyond their emergency management functions, touching, and sometimes crossing the very thin line between democracy and autocracy. At the same time, it was also possible to witness a certain executive underreach, that is, an underestimation of the emergency with a consequent institutional laxity with respect to pandemic containment policies. This, at an early stage, was the case in Trump’s United States, Bolsonaro’s Brazil, and Johnson’s United Kingdom. But in this case, the issue is on the theme of poor institutional performance and a culpable choice of low state capacity in order not to alienate a still uneducated public to the restrictions imposed by the emergency. In the first case, on the other hand, the issue is more sensitive because it confronts us with the presence of obvious undemocratic tendencies within contemporary democracies. The case of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is undoubtedly emblematic. The leader of the populist right used his emergency powers in an extreme way, resorting to the special legislation provided for in Article 53 of the Magyar Constitution after the declaration of the “State of Danger” (*veszélyhelyzet*), so much so that the Hungarian opposition, voting against the measure, called it “Dictator’s Law” (*diktátor-törvény*). Even after the end of the State of Danger in June 2020, some emergency measures remained in place such as, for example, a radical expansion of the powers granted to the military, including the power to use firearms against civilians within Hungary’s borders.

In times of emergency, therefore, a distinction must be made between the sometimes radical action of necessity that the governments deploy to cope with the crisis in the name of collective interest and the actions that instead go beyond the emergency and take on a real transformative function aimed at structurally changing the rules of operation of the regime. These actions justify the concern regarding a possible confusion between the concepts of emergency and exception, with the real risk of normalizing the exception itself (Halbertal 2020; Innerarity 2020). Undoubtedly, one of the ways to avoid this second landing place lies in the intelligent use of political communication (Burni and Tamaki 2021). Constructing a public discourse in which crisis awareness is actually replaced by a rhetoric of war, invasion, and danger shapes the symbolic justification for “exceptional” actions, as the Hungarian case, for example, has demonstrated in an almost paradigmatic way and at the same time provides the opening for conspiratorial, polarized, hyper-simplified discourses built around a substantial distrust of democratic institutions (Sniečkutė and Gaižauskatė 2021). Second, in order to protect democracy and to avoid regressive historical movements, the recognition of political pluralism understood as an expression of social pluralism, that is, the diverse interests that are articulated in modern societies, must be kept firm. But this is another topic, worthy of further discussion in other specific arenas.

## Note

- 1 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2020/04/covid-19-exceptional-measures-should-not-be-cover-human-rights-abuses-and#:~:text=%E2%80%9CGiven%20the%20exceptional%20nature%20of,pandemic%20itself%2C%E2%80%9D%20Bachelet%20said.>

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## 4 The fragility of ‘factual truths’ and the denial of experience

Arendtian observations and remedies to counter the reduction of democratic pluralism

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### Introduction

The reflections presented here highlight certain trends and critical issues in contemporary democracies, with particular focus on the sphere of communication that is increasingly rhetorical in character and aimed at simplifying and delegitimising the position of the other, with substantial effects leading to a reduction in the pluralistic dimension of democratic systems themselves.

The contribution is divided into three sections. The first briefly retraces the main political, social and cultural dynamics that are at the origin of contemporary neo-populisms and reports some ideal-typical features of populisms themselves. The second part emphasises the relevance of Hannah Arendt’s observations regarding the fragility of ‘factual truths’ in the face of the ‘power of lies’, with particular reference to the political and social effects that the recurrent strategies of simplification and polarisation of public discourse (by politics and media) can exercise, especially towards audiences not fully ‘equipped’ to contextualise distorted or simplifying messages, better known today as ‘fake news’. Following Arendt’s observations and making use of a wide interdisciplinary literature, the final section presents reflections on the ways in which to operate in order to mitigate the main political and social effects of the strategies of simplification and reduction of the value of experience and reality.

### The origins of contemporary populisms

The reflections presented here highlight certain trends and critical issues in contemporary democracies, with particular focus on the sphere of communication that is increasingly rhetorical in character and aimed at simplifying and delegitimising the position of the other, with substantial effects in leading to a reduction in the pluralistic dimension of democratic systems themselves.

Among the most common institutional transformations, which have proved a particularly fertile ground for the growing spread of contemporary populisms, we can identify, in the first place, those related to the representation, by rulers, of the values and interests of the citizenry. An essential instrument of this function was

the political party in the modern age, especially in the historical phase of the ‘mass party’. Among the traditional activities of this institution were political socialisation, through the creation, processing and dissemination of political information; the construction of political identities and affiliations; the foundation of consensus and the representative relationship; the synthesis, aggregation and mediation of social interests; social integration (with its relative attenuation of inequalities); the recruitment, selection and coordination of political elites; and the formulation of policy proposals (defining the political agenda and the content of public policies).

On closer inspection, as already noted elsewhere (Antonini, 2021), a few reflections should be made on the alleged ‘crisis’ of the parties, the subject of fervent debate for years. Taking into account the main indicators used in the analysis of party transformations, rather than a generic party ‘crisis’, it seems more appropriate to trace a relevant differentiation. On the one hand, there is certainly a profound crisis in the presence of the parties in society, in terms of a drop in the number of members, a drop in party identification, an increase in electoral volatility (with the growth of opinion voting rather than membership voting, typical of the territorially rooted, political-ideological subcultures of the First Republic, to refer to the Italian case), a crisis in the functions of structures in identities, the foundation of representation, mediation of interests and social integration (Diamanti, 2007). In this regard, as Ambrogio Santambrogio effectively argues (*infra*), alongside the phenomenon of ‘parties without society’, we are also witnessing the growing affirmation of ‘societies without parties’, where social and political identities – and the related social imaginaries, or sets of shared values, socially produced and difficult to realise as such – need to be translated into politically realisable ends and effective policies (by the party system), which can at least partially remove the political dynamic from the exclusive domain of emotions and irrationality. On the other hand, returning to the alleged ‘crisis of the parties’, it is, on the contrary, possible to detect a *reinforcing* of the *parties’ presence in the institutions*, in terms of recruitment, selection and coordination of elites and the formulation of policy proposals (definition of the public policy agenda) (Massari, 2004). It is precisely on this contradiction that the increasingly widespread inclinations of contemporary populism seem to leverage.

In terms of the more properly social dynamics associated with contemporary populisms, there is a frequent correlation, empirically verifiable, between dynamics of *social polarisation* and manifestations of *political polarisation*. The growth in social inequalities, taking place in many areas of the world, seems to represent a reversal of the previous tendency towards the ‘middle-classisation’ of societies (which had, by contrast, attenuated class differences). This phenomenon occurs in the widespread downgrading of the middle class, in the impoverishment of previously ascendant strata, and in the vertiginous rise of new privileged ones (De Rita & Bonomi, 2014). A particularly incisive example of this dynamic is the case of Venezuela, where between 1989 and 1998, the year of Chávez’s first electoral victory, the country experienced a drastic drop in the middle class, down from 37% to 13%, and a specular growth in the percentage weight of the popular class, from 58% to 83% (due to the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s and the significant

demographic growth of the same popular class). Chavismo can therefore be interpreted, according to some observers, as an expression of the social polarisation already taking place and, at the same time, as an agent of the transformation of social polarisation into political polarisation (by formulating a Manichaean political discourse, specifically aimed at the mobilisation and valorisation of the popular classes) (Ellner & Hellinger, 2004).

This phenomenon therefore also represents a case of *social* and *political mobilisation* and *inclusion of the popular classes* as a form of political re-socialisation of subjects who are in a condition of apathy and discontent with the normal institutional systems of representation and who place in populist movements profound expectations of radical change to the system (Anselmi, 2017, pp. 72–73).

The contexts affected by the dynamics of *social disintermediation* – in which there are profound changes in the existing balances between the governing and the governed, following the quantitative and qualitative reduction of social tools (institutional and otherwise) that relate the dimension of government to that of citizens – also appear functional to the resurgence of contemporary populisms. According to Giuseppe De Rita and Aldo Bonomi, in Italy this has been embodied by the ‘eclipse of middle society’ (2014), equivalent to the dissolution of ancient depositories such as the twentieth-century parties of the masses of the channels of traditional political participation, of late-industrial forms of aggregation (Revelli, 2017).

Populism is also often accompanied by phenomena of a *cultural transformation of the political elites*, through the emergence in these latter of ‘a gregarious spirit’ that goes hand in hand with the dwindling of their real decision-making autonomy, as is typical of highly depoliticised contexts, in which the economic sphere clearly prevails over the political one in terms of decision-making effectiveness. Some manifestations of such cultural transformations of political elites are engaged in “a linguistic and behavioural race to the bottom, combined with values that are ever more subaltern”, while substituting the “spirit of mediation and channelling of dissent through parliamentary channels” with

a rethoric that seems ‘politically incorrect’ (and, as such, sincere, as opposed to the prevalent hypocrisy), aggressive (and thus direct), instantaneous and targeted (unlike the inconclusive discussion of what the reactionaries of the nineteenth century called the *clase discutidora*, in their term for the nascent liberal-parliamentary bourgeoisie).

(Revelli, 2019, it. ed. 2017, pp. 9–10, 7)

In this latter regard, as William Davies writes, “speed of reaction often takes precedence over slower and more cautious assessments”, in line with the intent of giving the impression of “fixing problems immediately, and not bothering to debate them first” (Davies, 2018, pp. xi, 203).

Again, on the level of cultural dynamics, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris trace the origin of contemporary neo-populisms (especially in Europe and North America) to a *cultural backlash* against the profound transformations in

political culture promoted in recent decades by progressive forces and the multicultural and cosmopolitan vision they conveyed. This reaction would be at the origin of new lines of opposition (Anselmi, 2017, pp. 75–77). As the authors explain:

Extensive research indicates that since about 1970, affluent Western societies have seen growing emphasis on post-materialist and self-expression values among the younger birth cohorts and the better educated strata of society. This has brought rising emphasis on such issues as environmental protection, increased acceptance of gender and racial equality, and equal rights for the LGBT community. This cultural shift has fostered greater approval of social tolerance of diverse lifestyles, religions, and cultures, multiculturalism, international cooperation, democratic governance, and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights. Social movements reflecting these values have brought policies such as environmental protection, same sex marriage, and gender equality in public life to the center of the political agenda, drawing attention away from the classic economic redistribution issues.

(Norris & Inglehart, 2016, p. 29)

On the other hand, the spread of progressive values has also stimulated a cultural backlash among less educated and older citizens, particularly white males, who until recently constituted the privileged majority in Western societies, who find it difficult to feel that traditional values are ‘politically incorrect’ and feel marginalised and threatened by new developments. Thus, the authors conclude that “the evidence examined in this study suggests that the rise of populist parties reflects, above all, a reaction against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of Western societies” (Norris & Inglehart, 2016, pp. 29–31).

### **Populism: pathology or opportunity for democracy?**

Democracy and populism appear to be strongly intertwined today. A substantial difference between the two phenomena lies, however, in the fact that while democratic systems struggle to reconcile the democratic principle with the representative principle, populism tends, at least in principle, to reject the very principle of representation or to limit its use as much as possible. In doing so, it ends up, however, assuming a ‘special status’, as Yves Mény well argues, that consists in not fully accepting the usual tools of representative democracy, yet without adopting unconventional forms of political participation. As a matter of fact, on one hand populism rejects parties, is critical of political elites and claims the power to the people; on the other one, it organises itself as a political movement, stands in elections and relies on the seductions of a charismatic leader (Mény & Surel, 2000).

As several observers have noted, this attitude originates in the contradiction, which has never been resolved, between *ideal* democracy (which should allow the

masses real access to politics) and *real* democracy (which only imperfectly realises this ideal or tries to channel popular pressure) (Mény & Surel, 2000; Taguieff, 2002; Taggart, 2000). Any democracy is built on a tension, on an 'indissoluble bond' between utopia and realism, between faith and pragmatism, so the problem is not so much the coexistence of opposites but the balance that is established between them: as Margaret Canovan (1981) wrote, when the pragmatic or sceptical dimension becomes predominant over the expectations placed in democracy, there is room for the emergence of populism. On the other hand, Revelli notes, "*demos* in greek and *populus* in latin refer to the same subject: the people. And they thus refer to what is, in large part, a common destiny". Thus, populism is definable as

a 'symptom' of a deeper illness – even if one we are too often silent about – of democracy itself. It is the outward manifestation of a sickness in the contemporary form of democracy – the only one that has established itself in modernity, erected over the ruins of participatory utopias – that is, representative democracy. Whenever some part of 'the people' or an entire people, *does not feel represented*, it returns to one or another kind of reaction that takes the name of 'populism'. Early in democracy's development, this reaction appeared as its 'infantile disorder', when limited suffrage and class barriers kept part of the citizenry *out of* the game (late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century populism was, in large measure, a 'revolt of the excluded'). Today, it manifests itself as a 'senile disorder of democracy'. For the thinning-out of democratic processes and the return of oligarchic dynamics at the heart of the mature democracies marginalise or betray the mandate of a people whose 'sceptre' of power has been taken away. Post-twentieth-century populism is, in a sense, a 'revolt of the included' who have now been pushed to the margins. In both cases, what we might call the 'populist syndrome' is the product of a deficit of representation.

(Revelli, 2019, it. ed. 2017, pp. 3–4)

Paradoxically, the versatility of its 'ideology of the people' can also be considered a necessary, if not healthy, element of democratic societies, if care is taken not to excessively unbalance the relationship between the liberal and popular elements. It is no coincidence that populism as a latent force is more likely to appear in moments of tension, of crisis, as an indicator of a widespread malaise in the social and political body (Mény & Surel, 2000). Far from constituting a mere pathology, populism thus highlights, firstly, a malaise, which is not negligible, and which reminds us that democracy, a process under continuous construction, is never given once and for all. "But it also potentially expands the appel and vitality of democracy, beyond the limitations of existing parliamentary and party systems" (Davies, 2018, p. 39), to the extent that its manifestations are 'used' as a stimulus to monitor the quality of contemporary democracies in order to overcome the limitations inherent in the dynamics of forms of government and party systems.

**The fragility of ‘factual truths’, ‘power of lies’, ‘prejudice and judgement’: Arendtian observations in an age of simplification**

If this is the scenario – marked, according to a now extensive literature, by appeals to homogeneous people-communities, by disdain for experience and professionalism, by strategies of personalisation and disintermediation on the part of charismatic leaders, by anti-establishment logics and strong polarisation and opposition, even ethical, by the shift from ideology to the transversal ‘life story’ – the intent of these reflections, as already anticipated, is to focus attention, above all, on the traits referable to the populist communicative register, increasingly characterised by rhetorical modes aimed at simplifying and delegitimising the position of the other, with substantial effects of reducing the pluralistic dimension of democratic systems (Müller, 2017).

Hannah Arendt wrote in 1951 that totalitarian ideology claims to ever draw towards another reality, located in the future, to ‘become independent of all experience’ (even adapting facts to ideas, and not viceversa, if necessary) and to unilaterally and logico-deductively draw the interpretation of reality from a premise given as axiomatic, proceeding “with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality” (Arendt, 1951, pp. 470–471). It is no coincidence, according to the author, that the modern masses’ need for security is fully satisfied by the scientifically prophetic language of totalitarian propaganda, which plays, first and foremost, on the feeling of isolation and non-belonging typical of atomised individuals in mass society. Moreover, as Davies noted quoting Edward L. Bernays, even in democratic regimes “what the public wants in a democracy is a sense of intimacy with their rulers – not to be listened to or represented, but to gain a *feeling* of proximity to power” (Davies, 2018, p. 14).

Secondly, Arendt went on to say that totalitarian propaganda appeals to the contempt shown by individuals themselves for the contradictory nature of reality, to the inconvenient complexity of which they seem to prefer the clarity of a unilateral interpretation of it, which explains facts as examples of universal laws. Along these lines, particular attention was also given by the author to the constitutive *fragility of ‘factual truths’* in the face of the *power of lies*, especially in the case of ‘organised lies’. As she pointed out in a 1971 paper – and, significantly, not in reference to totalitarian contexts, but to the controversial affair linked to the revelations about the management of the Vietnam War by the United States, the nation that symbolised ‘consolidated democracy’:

The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehood or simply allowed to fall into oblivion.

(Arendt, 1971, p. 6)

And again:

Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of public

affairs. For this, it follows that no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt – as secure and shielded against attack as, for instance, the statement that two and two make four.

(Arendt, 1971)

This can be attributed to the greater plausibility of the lie than the reality itself:

Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared.

(Arendt, 1971)

These reflections appear highly relevant today, with reference to the political and social effects that the recurring strategies of simplification and polarisation of public discourse (political and media) can exert, especially on audiences not fully 'equipped' to contextualise distorted or simplifying messages, better known as fake news. Again, in Arendt's words:

the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth *vs.* falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.

(Arendt, 1967, It. trans. 1995, pp. 68–70)

And, in a famous passage in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, even more effectively:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (*i.e.*, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (*i.e.*, the standard of thought) no longer exist.

(Arendt, 1951, p. 474)

In the light of all this, the author invited us to exercise the human faculty of judgement, which she carefully distinguished, through enlightening reflections, from prejudice, placing them in relation to the temporal dimension of the past and present. According to Arendt, in fact, the effectiveness and dangerousness of prejudices lie in the fact that a piece of the past is latent in them:

The danger of prejudice lies in the very fact that it is always anchored in the past – so uncommonly well-anchored that it not only anticipates and blocks judgement, but also makes both judgement and a genuine experience of the present impossible. If we want to dispel prejudices, we must first discover



the past judgements contained within them, which is to say, we must reveal whatever truth lies within them.

(Kohn, 2005, p. 101)

Furthermore, the human faculty of judgement has more to do with a faculty for discernment than with a faculty for order and subsumption, which makes it, in line with Kant's theorisation of aesthetic judgement or judgement of taste, a mode of judging without criteria, which has as its reference, the evidence of the judgement (Arendt, 1995, pp. 14–15, 1982).

We can go on to see that in every historical crisis, prejudices tend to falter and consolidate into 'pseudo-theories' that, in the form of *Weltanschauungen* or ideologies, claim to understand the whole of historical and political reality. It follows that, if the function of prejudice consists in preserving the judging man from the obligation to confront in a critical light every reality he encounters, *Weltanschauungen* and ideologies perfectly fulfil this task and 'protect' him from all experience, insofar as they aspire to explain the whole of reality (Arendt, 1995, pp. 15–16).

These and other Arendtian reflections seem to find ever new applications (Antonini, 2002), since, as has been noted, "the restriction of freedom and repression of human spontaneity and the corruption of power through violence are a constant threat even to the politics of so-called liberal systems" (Sontheimer, in Arendt, 1995, p. IX, translation mine).

### **'Listening to emotions' and 'reasonable discussion': remedies against the reduction of democratic pluralism**

Some of the most alarming effects related to anti-pluralist rhetoric, widely adopted by contemporary populisms, which lead towards the simplification of the complexity of reality, going so far as to dispense with empirical experience, can be identified in the polarisation of political discourse, often at the origin of the growth of intolerance towards whoever/whatever is different, through the exacerbation of a sense of border, the dissemination of a sense of disorientation, and the augmentation of collective insecurity, especially perceived in societies which are already much undermined by growing individualism, in turn, the result of stigmatisation of the different and the erosion of social capital (Sennett, 1982; Habermas, 1996).

Emblematic in this sense is the case of the conspicuous gap, revealed especially in Italy, between the perceived and the real percentage of resident immigrants (Istituto Cattaneo, 2018). A study by the Cattaneo Research Institute (*Immigration in Italy: between reality and perception*), conducted in August 2018, showed that Italy is the European country with the widest gap between the perceived and the real percentage of immigrant population residing on the national territory. While immigrants in Italy account for 7% of the total population (9% if we consider those from the European Union itself), 70% of those interviewed during the survey believed that they represented between 20% and 28% of the population, with percentages varying according to political orientation, level of education and geographical area of residence. A particularly significant finding in its contrast with



reality is that the perception of the phenomenon is higher in the South (27%), where immigrants account for 5% of the population, than in the North (20%), where they account for 10%.

Something similar is also evident in the phenomenon of 'de-statisticisation' characteristic of penal populism, where criminal and security issues are discussed 'with total disregard of statistical and, in general, real data' and subordinating 'the arguments that animate public debate on legal matters to the needs of social and political consensus' (Anselmi, 2017, p. 18, translation mine). With the consequence that, as William Thomas (1928) continues to teach us, belief in representations, albeit distorted, of reality – as in the case of the idea of the foreign 'invasion' (Ambrosini, 2020) – produces real effects on the actions of individuals and social groups.

In short, the *denial* of experience that we are increasingly witnessing seems to be heading in two directions, which are, moreover, complementary. Firstly, representation is increasingly replacing reality whose demise the media's ample ability to gift-package a world more pleasant and convincing than the real one largely contributes – a replacement, moreover, that subtracts relevance from the need to live one's experiences directly (Codeluppi, 2018, p. 9). Secondly, among the ideal-typical traits of populist-inspired manifestations, as already noted, lurks contempt for experience understood as expertise and professionalism. As has been noted, "the politics of crowd is creeping into spaces that were once reserved for experts and official representatives", who often find themselves having to defend their public position, often being represented as a privileged elite, a self-referential community claiming to educate the rest of society. This is indicative of 'a major historic shift', if we consider that "reactions against expertise may seem like an irrational rejection of truth itself, yet they are more often a rejection of the broader political edifice from which society is governed" (Davies, 2018, pp. 28–29). On the other hand, the excesses of technocracy can also be held responsible for an increasing decline of reason in the political sphere.

From this scenario, it is useful to reflect upon the ways it may be possible to mitigate these and other effects of the strategies of simplification and reduction of the value of experience and reality.

In the first place, as already argued elsewhere (Antonini, 2021), it appears fundamental *to keep the surveillance threshold constantly high on the pluralistic dimension of the political system*, namely, on the substantial application of the rule of law, on the respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, on the real independence of institutions from executive power, on the pluralism of information and on the development of the liberal (and not merely electoral) dimension of democracy (Dahl, 1971; Rokkan, 1970; Barber, 1984; Diamond, 1999). Only in this way are citizens equipped with the tools of knowledge, critical evaluation, control, proposal and decision, recovering those forms of 'counter-democracy' (Rosanvallon, 2012) able to make them critically and politically active subjects, stemming the risk of being reduced to an 'indistinct people'.

It is also essential to *re-evaluate a culture of intermediation* that restores meaning to representative democracy, the only adequate form, albeit never definitive and

ever perfectible, for complex conditions such as those of late-modern societies. It is a question of recovering the value of education and experience, investing, first and foremost, in the growth of political elites, in order to construct expertise capable of performing the functions of mediation of interests and the conception of alternative projects for society, structured on the medium-long term rather than on often unilateral decisionism, typical of a ‘culture of the present’ (Mongardini, 1993). As has recently been noted, with regard to the difference between *decisions* and *choices*, if decisions “can be traced back to computational activities, it is possible to define their procedures in the form of algorithms and they can be taken on by well-programmed machines” (translation mine). Choices, instead,

inevitably require human intervention, because they involve reference to experience, memory, emotions, value systems, empathy, subtle perceptions, acceptance of uncertainty, intuition. Like all human functions that require judgement, respect, understanding, thoughtfulness and love, they are not computable.

(Carofiglio, 2020, p. 112; translation mine)

In order to re-evaluate the institution of representation, attention must also be focused on the recovery of *responsiveness* on the part of elites, enabling them to better place themselves in a position to listen to and welcome the requests coming from the various social strata, bearers of contrasting needs and levels of vulnerability. As Davies notes, as we become increasingly accustomed to ‘real time’ events and communications, “we inevitably end up putting more trust in sensation and emotions than in evidence” (Davies, 2018, p. 35). On the other hand, the author continues, referring to Gustave Le Bon, “it really doesn’t matter to the crowd what is said, but merely how it makes them feel” (Davies, 2018, p. 13).

But, again following the author, if the power of emotions is significantly transforming our democracies, the invitation to ‘try to listen to them better’ appears particularly urgent, rather than merely denigrating their influence on contemporary societies. It is no coincidence, as we have seen, that the ‘populist syndrome’ is almost always the product of a “deficit of representation” (Revelli, 2019, it. trans. 2017, p. 4) and it is appropriate, abandoning a widespread preconception, to start taking seriously the concerns of a growing number of voters currently attracted by the suggestions of extremist movements, starting to consider them “as free and equal citizens, not as pathological cases of men and women driven by frustration, anger and resentment” (Müller, 2017, it. trans., p. 133). Their emotions, on closer inspection, represent indicators of a deep social unease and legitimate claims, the result of the ‘unfulfilled promises’ of the processes of modernisation and democratisation, already clearly identified by Norberto Bobbio (1984). However, the different relevances of individual emotions from a political point of view must be kept in mind. As has been rightly noted,

The mistake of progressive policy tools, such as statistics and economics, is to assume that human action is reducible to hedonistic impulses, seeking

more and more contentment. But the relief of pain and fear is a more potent force in human psychology, and undoubtedly a more political effective one.

(Davies, 2018, p. 224)

Crucial, too, is investment in public policies that can *halt the growing inequalities associated with neo-liberal 'globalism'* (Beck, 1999). Economic growth or increased life expectancy are often statistically achieved goals in a country, but not all members of society benefit to the same extent. This explains, for example how Donald Trump was able to win the 2016 presidential election through a campaign centred on a feeling of outrage at America's decline, despite the fact that the US economy, including job creation, had shown steady growth during Barack Obama's second term. But, on closer inspection, "half of the American population experienced no form of economic progress in nearly forty years"; hence, "the divisive effect of economic inequality is such that aggregates and averages are simply no longer credible representations of how things are" (Davies, 2018, pp. 76–77).

The persistent segmentation of the social strata into increasingly unequal strata has obvious costs on the economic but also on the socio-political level. It is no coincidence, for example, that young Neet, who do not study, work or engage in other learning pathways, often due to the persistent relevance of factors of inequality of ascribed origin, show significantly lower levels of interest in politics, trust in institutions and social and political participation than their peers engaged in educational or work pathways (Antonini, 2014).

Not to be underestimated, moreover, are the growing inequalities also in terms of physical health, with reference to gaps in indicators such as life expectancy and mortality rates, marking a new cleavage, to stay with the American example, between liberal and conservative America, between urban and rural America ('The Washington Post', 2016). It is essential to reflect on the fact that "people are as influenced by their physical condition and prospects as by their values or preferences" and that "the experience of physical deterioration provokes in people a desire for a different type of political rule altogether – one that casts experts and technocrats aside" (Davies, 2018, p. 102).

On a more strictly cultural level, a fundamental objective is *to foster the formation of a far more critically aware citizenship*, especially in our age of 'communicative flood' so strongly compromising of the relevance of the agencies of traditional socialisation (Morcellini, 2011). This can also be achieved, as Gianrico Carofiglio recently recalled, by education in the identification and deconstruction of rhetorical 'fallacies', so very frequent in the sphere of communication – those unintentional or intentional errors that invalidate rational arguments and are vehicles for distorted and manipulative communication strategies, tending to delegitimise the adversary, for the sole purpose of consensus. Just as Le Bon had already noted "exaggeration, assertion, repetition, and never attempting to prove anything by reasoning are expedients familiar to speakers at popular meetings" (Le Bon, it. trans., 2004, p. 76).

In contrast, 'reasonable discussion', based on respect for ethical and epistemological rules, is a valid alternative, to be taught and learnt, to disable fallacious

strategies, to spot them and to show their mechanisms. This is useful both in terms of ‘dialectical self-defence’ in interpersonal conversation, and in terms of ‘critical reading of public debates’, in order to elude more or less covert manipulation and bring the conversation and public debate back onto a plane of shared rationality.

Some of the most common rhetorical fallacies include:

- the fallacy of *the failure to respect the burden of proof* (or *its very reversal*), that is the failure to respect the principle that it is the duty of the claimant to prove what he is saying, out of a commitment to truth, transparency and fairness (and not of the claimant to oppose the thesis);
- the fallacy of *the straw man argument*, that is the misrepresentation of the thesis *x* that one wants to counter, its exaggeration and transformation into an argument *y* (similar in appearance but weaker and more vulnerable to attack), in order to give the impression of having succeeded in dismantling thesis *x*;
- the fallacy of *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* or the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which leads one to claim that two things that happened simultaneously (*cum hoc*) or in chronological sequence (*post hoc*) are causally related (as in the case of the false syllogism);
- the fallacy of the *slippery slope* or *sloping plane*, consisting of shifting the discussion, often in an underhand manner, from a given thesis to its extreme, often merely hypothetical consequences;
- the fallacy of the *argumentum ad nomine* (*ad hominem*), whereby one counteracts the arguments of one’s opponent without entering into their merits and launches a personal attack instead.

The frequent use of the last denotes, in particular, the increasing precarity of the ideal of the ‘disinterested representative’ and the erosion of the public-private divide, so much so that “*ad hominem* attacks on scientists are as just effective in discrediting their research as criticisms of their research methods” (Davies, 2018, p. 27; Barnes et al., 2018). Against the increasing recourse to rhetorical fallacies, Carofiglio recalls some examples of practices and rules for reasonable discussion. These include *the practice of kindness*, a method for dealing with and resolving conflicts and producing meaningful human relationships; *the practice of courage*, understood as a civic virtue and an engine for change; *the exercise of active citizenship*, understood as the ability to doubt, ask oneself and ask (good) questions; *the exercise of cognitive patience*, understood as the ability to refrain from judgement in the absence of the necessary elements and insight (Wolf, 2018) and *the exercise of narrative imagination*, understood as the ability to imagine the story of those who are different from us (Nussbaum, 2009; Carofiglio, 2020, pp. 55–75).

In the final analysis, countering the increasingly common strategies aimed at reducing democratic pluralism, and above all their effects, must be developed along two pathways, one at the socio-economic level – through the definition of public policies with greater focus on social sustainability and the reduction of inequalities – and the other at the cultural level. Here, in political elites, communication professionals and citizenship, a form of growth appears fundamental, a

growth – once again in the Arendtian spirit – centred on the cultivation of an aptitude for *phronesis* – that ability to discern a political situation – which allows one to gain as complete a picture as possible of the multiple perspectives from which a situation can be assessed. Hence, not only the fundamental capacity to ‘think in agreement with oneself’, which gives validity to the Kantian categorical imperative, but also that – found in Kant’s analysis of common sense as the faculty of judgement (1790) – of “thinking while in the position of the other” (Arendt, 1995, pp. 76–77, translation mine).

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**Part two**

**The identity and social  
foundations of democratic  
freedom**





## 5 Identity and democracy

*Andrea Millefiorini*

### Introduction

The close relationship that lies between politics and identity is well known, just as for even longer and in greater depth, that between identity and religion. These concepts have been extensively explored by the classics and contemporaries of sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. Schmitt, Weber, Pareto, and Fromm are only among the best known of the many authors who have dealt with this fundamental relationship in the social sciences.

The connection between politics and identity is much more intuitive than the one between identity and democracy seems to be. Can a democracy, as a political and social system, meet people's need for identity, or is this relationship always destined to remain troubled in complex and open societies such as ours? We will try to answer this question.

### Modernity and identity

Societies endowed with an individualistic culture, in other words, advanced modern societies with democratic political systems, can only function if, in their hierarchy of values and principles, they hold high an 'open society'. A society, in other words, is open to change, diversity, and the Other. This is at least to the extent that this value is able to guarantee civil, political, and social rights. The demand for the latter grows progressively, both quantitatively and qualitatively. An open society thus corresponds to an individualistic culture that forges individual identities socialised from childhood to values of openness, tolerance, and acceptance of the diversity of others.

Now, if we take a brief excursus on the social and political history of the West since the beginning of modernity as commonly understood,<sup>1</sup> we can observe how the progressive enlargement of the space held by individual conscience and individual identity has always been accompanied, in one way or another, by forms of compensation that, although unable to completely fill the void left by the retreat of the collective conscience (the problem of the individual uprooted from nature and the community is one that runs through all of modernity, without exception), have nonetheless ensured a sufficient anchorage of individuals to the social context that

surrounds them. Put another way, sufficient *social integration* enables the existence of an open society based on an individualistic culture. This was acceptable and sufficient at least until the 1960s. Until the 18th century, religion and class, territorial and neighbourhood affiliations more than sufficiently guaranteed the development of strong social identities. In the society that established itself between the 18th and 19th centuries, the bourgeois individual, although educated to 'self-direction' (Riesman, 1950), did not lose those important references typical of traditional society: family and paternal authority, authority in education and training, an upbringing in patriotism, and membership of status or class.

With the 20th century, what had been the traditional references of bourgeois culture were progressively eroded until their definitive exit from the scene with the appearance of Ortega y Gasset's mass-man (Ortega y Gasset, 1930). The latter, also on the basis of a desire for emancipation and individualisation through totalitarian and anti-system ideologies, attacked the bourgeois culture that could have protected him not only from totalitarianism but also from the loss of social identity references, even though the proletariat's tendency towards bourgeoisification was always evident, notwithstanding ideological slogans declaimed in the squares and published in party manifestos.

Again with the 20th century, the gap left empty by the further loss of collective references gave rise to a contrasting phenomenon. On the one hand, we witnessed the emergence of a differentiation in social identities (Simmel, 1890), with proletarian identity absorbing a large part of the working-class masses' sense of belonging to their own class and party community (Weber, 1922). On the other hand, it was the same political ideologies of the first half of the 20th century that contributed to filling the growing identity gap that began to show increasingly visible cracks in the 20th-century Self. That is to say, that in response to their own need for identity, which arose from the loss of previous references, demolished by the irruption of mass-man and mass society, the individual, placed in the first half of the 20th century, also blindly embraced anti-democratic and, paradoxically, even anti-individualist ideologies, parties, and political cultures.

Therein lies the colossal misunderstanding that arose between mass-man and the 20th-century revolutionary elites. Mass-man, thirsting for identity, emancipation, and individualisation, believed that he was satisfying his thirst by embracing anti-bourgeois and anti-individualist political ideologies. This did, indeed, satisfy for identity, but as far as the need for emancipation and individualisation was concerned, mass-man was faced with two different fates: that of countries in which revolutionary elites succeeded in overthrowing previous democratic regimes, and that of countries in which the ruling groups of communist parties found themselves having to play politics in democratic political systems. In the first case, mass-man was further atomised and reduced to pure matter to be moulded in the hands of charismatic elites (Nazi Germany, Communist Russia). In the second case, a curious phenomenon took place: the bourgeoisisation and individualisation of mass-man forced the communist parties to shift to progressively more moderate positions (Sartori, 1982) until their definitive social-democratisation (never expressly recognised, however: in Italy the PCI gave itself the most diverse names but never that

of Socialist Party so as not to have to admit its own historical failure; in France and Spain, it stubbornly continued to call itself communist, until its electoral and therefore political irrelevance).

What happened instead, starting in the 1970s in the West, when the slow but inexorable decline of ideologies began (Bell, 1960)? Certainly, there were countries such as the United States, in which the 'reflux' already began in that decade, and others, such as Italy, for which we speak instead, of a 'long Sixty-eight', meaning that throughout the 1970s ideological tension remained very high, also as a consequence of certain characteristics of the Italian political system (Sartori, 1982).

Be that as it may, the *Sunset of Ideology* (Colletti, 1986) meant the beginning of a major existential problem for *fin de siècle* western man. That identity gap, which we have seen, was to some extent, filled by political ideologies in the first half of the 20th century, reopened dramatically, leaving a vacuum to be laboriously filled with a mechanism that imposed itself in the 1980s, and which is still largely present today in the 'societies of individuals' of the new millennium. This mechanism is called social narcissism, or mass narcissism.

Narcissism as a sociological phenomenon (Lipovetsky, 1987) developed in response to the individual's growing need for security and identity reinforcement in an era in which the public, understood as the public and political 'sphere', was receding to make more and more room for the private and the private sphere (Hirschman, 1982). If, then, narcissism succeeded to some extent in buffering the fragilities and insecurities of *individual* identity, nothing, of course, could stand in the way of the progressive collapse of *social* identity in European and North American citizens in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

This collapse has led to the mounting of moods and feelings of closure towards the Other, of distrust and mistrust towards everything that does not come from the narrow and limited perimeter of one's own vital world, one's own 'circumstance'. Hence the emergence of a new phenomenon, neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1988; Mongardini, 1997), capable of securing that little sense of belonging and social identity that can guarantee the feeling of being part of a 'tribe', a self-referential group, detached from the wider collective sphere, and only capable of reproducing aspects of reality that do not clash with and annoy the narrow cultural and social view of its members.

### Identity and society: a typology

Here is the situation, briefly summarised, historically established from 19th-century bourgeois society to the present day.

Picking up now on what is said above of the societies that preceded modernity, it is possible to add some typical traits of these social organisations in order to arrive at a first typology of societies built around the following variables:

|                  |                                   |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| social identity  | (strong – weak);                  |
| culture          | (holistic – individualistic);     |
| political system | (centralised – democratic);       |
| social mobility  | (limited – not formally limited). |

Clearly, these are variables that can be operationalised by identifying different levels of intensity between the polarities we have, for now, roughly sketched. For instance, the Roman Republic was not an autocracy, but nor was it a democracy. The Roman Empire was itself an autocracy, but of lesser intensity than the Persian despotism of Cyrus the Great or the Mongol despotism of the Khan. The past has indeed witnessed many examples of political systems that were not democratic, but neither were they centralised as in archaic Germanic society (Marx, 1965).

It should be noted, therefore, that each *continuum* indicated with the four variables *is not necessarily parallel to each other*. The variables can be combined in the most diverse ways, and real historical examples can be found to corroborate and confirm them. For example, there may well be societies with a strong social identity and also with moderate or broad social mobility, such as the Western European societies in the first decades of the 20th century. Or tribal societies, which were by no means autocratic, but in which a typically holistic culture existed.

So why and what is the usefulness of outlining such a typology? The reason lies in the fact that, although not *necessarily*, according to comparative socio-historical studies available in the literature to date (Spencer, 1876–1896; Toynbee, 1934; Parsons, 1966; Pellicani, 2002), there *tends* to be a certain parallelism between the aforementioned variables (at least up to the end of the 20th century; from the 21st century onwards, as we shall shortly see, this pattern seems to show more than one area in which it is harder to apply).

That is, we can draw a left-hand column and a right-hand column with the variables we have proposed above, spatially arranged in a manner reminiscent of the *continuum* between holistic and individualistic society, between community and society (Tönnies), or between collective and individual consciousness (Durkheim).

In the historical parabola of Western societies, it is therefore possible to identify a typology that resembles something along these lines:

- In pre-modern societies, there is strong integration, weak individualism, and strong social identity; holistic culture, tendency to closure towards diversity, political systems tend /to be monarchical or autocratic; realisation of the individual is in productive, religious, and military spheres, but not in political ones; social mobility is very weak.
- In modern bourgeois societies, there is good integration, individualism, and good social identity; tolerance towards certain forms of diversity; political systems based on the rule of law; the individual is realised in productive, artistic, military, and, for certain categories and social classes, also political spheres. Social mobility is moderate.
- In modern mass societies until the 1960s, there is sufficient integration, individualism, and pluralistic culture; reasonable social identity is guaranteed by a sense of belonging to social roles and social classes; predominantly democratic political systems; the individual is fulfilled in all social spheres; social mobility is not formally restricted and may be quite strong, at times substantial.
- In the modern mass societies of the late 20th century, there is decreasing social integration, strong individualism, narcissism, open and pluralistic culture, and decreasing social identity; political systems are democratic; the individual may

be formally realised in all social spheres, but substantial mobility begins to decrease.

- In modern societies of individuals, or even ‘hypermodern’ (Touraine, 2015), at the beginning of the 21st century, there is strong individualism, narcissism, and culture typical of an open society but weak social integration and weak social identity. Political systems are democratic but affected by a latent crisis due to the decline of large frames of identity and growing distrust in institutions; the individual is formally realised in all social spheres, but social mobility is medium-low.

As we can see, societies with strong social integration (the first we encounter in our typology) guarantee a strong social identity but not as much capacity for expression and personal fulfilment. The culture is that of a society closed to diversity and founded on strong and hard-to-break normative principles. However, this is by no means an ‘iron law’. It is not because, as far as social identity is concerned, a distinction must in turn be made between social identity that tends to be closed and social identity that tends to be open. We can therefore have societies with a strong social integration, with a tendentially closed social identity, for example, Sparta, and societies with a strong social integration, and a tendentially open social identity, for example, Athens. Both of these cases guaranteed to the individual strong integration in the community and societal context. Therefore, in pre-modern societies, since social integration was always strong, the individual did not suffer identity crises either in closed social identity pre-modern societies (Sparta) or in predominantly open social identity pre-modern societies (Athens).

It follows that:

- 1) where we have closed social identity, we *always* have strong individual identity (e.g., Sparta; ancient Egypt; Islamic societies from the 7th to the 20th century; traditional societies in general);
- 2) where we have open social identity, there are two sub-cases:
  - 2a) one has a strong individual identity if one is in a sufficiently integrated society (Athens; 17th-century Holland; 19th-century England);
  - 2b) one has a fragile individual identity where one is in a society that is poorly integrated and/or tends to be fragmented (Western mass societies – 20th–21st centuries).

It is obvious that within these three types (1, 2a, and 2b), we then find a whole variety of mixtures of social models, with an equal number of available historical examples.

### **The (small) wound that still bleeds totalitarian ideologies**

The logical consequence of the above is that, in poorly integrated societies, we find a fragile and insecure individual who, in order to cope with their own fragility and insecurity, is pushed towards a closed social identity, unwilling to recognise diversity and the Other, an identity that is at least able to reassure them, to make them, let

us say, feel ‘warm’ about prejudices. However, this condition is, as we have seen, practically impossible to live in our times, in times of globalisation, of the advent of movements such as Black Lives Matter and LGBT, in short, of ethical movements (Touraine, 2015) that show how and how much the individualistic culture of civil, political, and social rights typical of open societies is not only not waning but also continues to advance inexorably. This innate impossibility, this condition of ‘obligatory openness’ of social identity, is the main cause of the eternal birth and reproduction, in advanced industrial societies, of ‘individual identities in search of an author’, we might say quoting Pirandello, the playwright-sociologist, who had profoundly intuited the identity dynamics of bourgeois and then mass society.

Such fragile individual identities satiate their thirst by embracing closed social identities. This is why, almost a century after the failures of totalitarian ideologies, political movements that hark back to fascism, communism, or, even worse, Nazism are still being born and reproduced today (especially among young people, who do not yet have a well-formed and defined individual identity). Some of the causes that led Europe in the 1920s and 1930s to the birth of totalitarianism have not yet been completely expunged from the bosom of contemporary societies. The difference, compared to then, lies in the fact that, in the wake of the tragedies produced by totalitarianisms in Europe and elsewhere, the political cultures of the countries affected by the phenomena we are talking about have been, so to speak, ‘vaccinated’ against the virus and possess the necessary antibodies to deal with it and thus avoid a new pandemic. Or, at least, that is how it has been until now. Since the same triggers are still present today (at least the ones of our discussion; other causes, fortunately, have disappeared), this explains why we see formations such as ‘Forza Nuova’ in Italy, ‘AFD’ in Germany, and ‘Front National’ in France. Before that, right-wing and left-wing terrorism raged in Europe. The need for identity, as we can see, is always present, a sign that although we now find ourselves in open societies, these, due to their intrinsic characteristics, are not able to ‘fix’ solid individual identities, or at least identities that do not seek certainties, and social references that they do not find in the bosom of present-day societies. It is as if open societies were continually producing their own enemies. Obviously, this phenomenon does not affect *all* citizens but a *residual part* of them. That part that also responds, at the same time, to their personal characteristics that put them more at risk in this specific respect. Here, factors and elements of a psychological and psychodynamic order evidently also come into play, for which there is no lack, in any case, of valid references in the psychological and psycho-social literature (Freud, 1921; Fromm, 1941; Taiphel, 1982).

To identity-related reasons, of course, must be added causes that concern personality traits and the type of instincts, feelings, and passions that characterise the subject. A society is made up of subjects with very different personalities and individual traits, and when we speak of ‘society’, we must always bear in mind that it is not an aggregate of elements that are equal but a very composite formation that is highly differentiated internally. This is where Pareto handily steps in, with his well-known classification of residuals (by this deliberately aseptic term, the Italian sociologist meant something very similar to what philosophers had always called

‘moral sentiments’). These personalities, it would be said, do not lack the residue of the ‘persistence of aggregates’<sup>2</sup> and that of the ‘integrity of the individual and their dependencies’ (Pareto, 1916), residues that are, moreover, closely tied to the element of identity.

### **Active identities and passive identities: social commitment and populism**

The above considerations on identity and Pareto’s discourse on residues and derivations can help us reach a deductive explanation of the phenomenon of populism.

The concept of populism, as it has gradually settled in political sociology and the social sciences in general, does not coincide with that of ideology. Instead, populism can be approached as what Theodor Geiger (1963) and Juan Linz (1964, 1970) define as a ‘mentality’. The populist mentality is clearly identifiable by certain specific, distinguishing traits. The main differences lie in the fact that

- a) mentality feeds on values, ideas, and interests that are not necessarily coherent with each other. It projects the actor in a perspective anchored in the present and little-oriented towards the future;
- b) ideology, on the contrary, consists of a coherent and rigid system of values, ideas, and interests and also performs a conative function for the actor and the groups that carry them.

The mentality can identify different types of populism, as, more generally, of political cultures, depending on the different combinations of Pareto residues that it comes to satisfy through the derivations it produces. What interests us here is that populism has evidently filled the empty space left by ideologies in Western democracies. As we shall see shortly, however, it has not managed to fill *all* that space. Ideologies ‘propped up’ the need for identity for most of the 20th century, except for the last two decades, when the period of crisis began, which led to their definitive exit from the Western political and social arena. The individual of hyper-modern societies (Touraine) has compensated for the emptiness of identity by taking refuge, as we have seen, mainly in narcissism (Cesareo and Vaccarini, 2006; Millefiorini, 2015), consumerism (Baudrillard, 1970; Lipovetsky, 2006), the aestheticisation and ‘window-dressing of the social’ (Codeluppi, 2007).

However, this was clearly not enough to fill that void. In the public arena, we are witnessing important phenomena. Two in particular are worthy of attention. The first concerns what has already been said about the substitution process between ideologies and populist mentalities. The second concerns forms of displacement from traditional political participation to forms of civic engagement. The first is an identity phenomenon of a passive type. The second is an active one. Both characterise the 21st century and constitute the register through which the ‘democracy of the public’ takes shape and form, replacing the ‘democracy of the parties’ (Manin, 1995).

Indeed, if we look more closely at the personal characteristics of those who are attracted to the strongest forms of populism, we observe subjects with little



aptitude for initiative, creativity, or action. They are easily conditioned, impressionable, and manipulable, with little trust in others and in institutions in particular. We also have here, however, subjects in search of the self, and thus of an individual identity, but in search of a *realisation* of the self, rather than its *reflection* in something or someone.

Indeed, populism, unlike ideology, does not perform a conative function at all. It does not push to action, to initiative; it does not provide time perspectives or programmes aimed at the future, at achieving common, collective goals, for which forms of participation, mobilisation, and commitment are needed. Everything is willingly delegated to leader figures in whom one reflects one's need for identity. The creativity of the individual, lacking from the outset, is not stimulated, and a vicious circle of passivity – acceptance – projection onto others of one's own frustrations – acceptance of anti-political, discriminatory, racist messages and slogans is thus created. Ideology, when it was present in the West, instead performed a dual function; it met both the needs of predominantly passive identity and self and those of predominantly active identity and self. To the former, because it provided a reading of reality that fulfilled expectations of satisfaction of needs, of projection onto 'other' categories (not infrequently 'scapegoats' (Girard, 1986)) of one's own identity gaps and of social integration. To the latter, because it provided instruments of activation and realisation of the self and one's identity, capable of supporting and bridging the gap of social integration and thus of a tendentially weak social identity.

While ideology used to perform this dual function in the past, populism today performs only one, from the point of view we are dealing with here, namely the passive identity function. The second function, the active identity function, is therefore no longer the domain of ideology, nor even of populism, at least as of today. It has therefore been almost entirely expunged from the traditional organisational horizon of political parties and shifted to other planes of social action.

But where does this leave participation in democracies? Are we to conclude that we are moving towards democracies of likes, followers, and the number of views on Instagram and YouTube (Drake and Higgins, 2012)? No: as always, society is self-organising to provide answers to voids, to needs, to functions to which previous institutions and cultures are no longer equipped to provide answers. And it is precisely on the side of individualities in search of an identity on a *realising* plane that democracy continues to offer opportunities and possibilities. *The democracy of the public* is, in fact, as we have seen, the current form, the current 'type' of democracy, masterfully described by Bernard Manin (1995). It is characterised by a smaller space of separation between elected representatives and voters. That is, representatives, rulers, and leaders of political formations and movements tend to use ways, styles, and languages that bring them closer to the voters, the public, and the citizens. Between one and the other, the separation that used to characterise *party democracy*, with its rituals, its initiatory, formal and celebratory language, its messages and unstated messages, its hierarchies, its slogans, and its calls to arms, tends to become increasingly thinner. Even more, the democracy of the public



differs from the *democracy of the elites*, which had characterised political systems even before the advent of mass society in the 19th century. In that model, the political classes were just as well-prepared and competent as those of party democracy, but even more distant from the public.

We are therefore witnessing a historical trend, at least until today, which shows the following traits: the further back we go in time, the more we find political classes that are distant, from a media-communicative point of view, from the electorate, but prepared and competent insofar as they come from clearly identifiable classes and categories. Vice versa, the closer we get to the model of democracy of the public, the more we witness a growth of the reciprocal interchanges between political classes and the public (think of social networks), but a weakening of the political, technical, and administrative competence of the political classes, since they no longer come from categories and classes endowed with social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2015), but from a tendentially indistinct public of subjects. In the democracy of the public at the beginning of the 21st century, therefore, what had been the traditional model of participation in parties, at least from an identity-active perspective, can no longer function.

Subjects who are driven towards a definition and recognition of an identity within an active, rather than a passive, path are therefore seeking other paths. The nature of these paths is straightforward: they are forms of engagement that place the individual much more at the centre of the participatory context than traditional repertoires. The individual seeks in participation and social and civic engagement greater chances of fulfilment of their identity expectations. And this is true at the level of both individual and social identity. Moreover, if populism presupposes, as we have seen, a closed social identity, which has various and relevant consequences for political language, political culture, models and communication styles, civic and social participation, on the other hand, it does not satisfy, nor presuppose, a priori, a closed or open identity. It tends to outline and shape itself in one way or another depending on whether the demand for social identity is open or closed. Thus, we will have, for example, forms of civic or social engagement associated with open identity – such as volunteering to assist immigrants in difficulty – and forms of civic or social engagement associated with closed identity – such as associations that propose recovery from homosexuality through targeted cures and therapies.

It can therefore be said that the ways in which active forms of identity are pursued nowadays rely more on the social and civil sphere than on the purely political one. This is due to the disappearance, as we have seen, of the traditional role played by ideologies and parties. This may indeed constitute a problem for political participation, at least in the terms in which it took shape and body in the last century. True, today we are witnessing not only forms of ‘light’ but also more widespread political participation than decades ago. Moreover, new forms of participation by means

of digital tools have gradually established themselves. Information and interest in politics have also increased, and considerably, compared to the early post-war decades.

Although, however, Almond and Powell (1966) affirmed in the 1960s that a democracy, in order to function well, does not need intensive and mass participation (which, on the contrary, could create forms of mal- or dys-functioning, again according to the two American political scientists), today we cannot fail to note that the reflux of political engagement since the 1980s has emptied that relationship between politicians on the one hand and activists, militants, and sympathisers on the other, at the basis of which a not insignificant part of the mechanisms of democratic representation revolved.

### **Identity and democracy**

The relationship between the political sphere and social and individual identity, in advanced Western democracies, thus remains an open question to this day. Of course, this relationship, in a democracy, is *structurally* uncertain, regardless of the period and the models one takes into consideration. It also, and above all, results in a difficult relationship between identity and political representation (Weber, 1918). In these early decades of the 21st century, however, this relationship appears even more difficult and controversial than in previous eras, and it reminds us of the period of serious crisis of democracy that occurred exactly a century ago throughout Europe.

Taking the Pareto model of the functioning of social equilibrium as a reference (Pareto, 1916), we could say that in the early decades of the 21st century, the relationship between society and politics lacks a sufficient outlet for what he called the residues (in essence, as we have already seen, moral sentiments) in an adequate justification, recognition, or at least reflection in systems of ideas, political cultures, social representations, and political imaginaries (elements that Pareto called ‘derivations’) made their own and translated into a language comprehensible to the political sphere. This was not the case, as we have seen, in the period of maximum expression of ideologies (also derivations according to Pareto), of whatever nature they were. This causes a difficult, and we would say *structurally* difficult, connection between the micro level (*residues*) and the macro level (*derivations*) of society. When these two levels, in a social aggregate, no longer communicate well with each other, or when there are interruptions and discrepancies, in short, an inadequate outlet and inadequate reflection of the residues in derivations, the process of constructing meaning in a society is undermined, and this jeopardises, in the long run, trust, integration, and social solidarity.

That all-important relationship is thrown into crisis by a dual and reciprocal causality: de-massification (Millefiorini, 2015) and social fragmentation into increasingly self-referential groups, categories, and sectors cause social identities to be difficult to recompose within a framework of collective recognition; conversely, the socially widespread need for identity remains unsatisfied due to the impossibility/ineffectiveness of politics to redesign new perspectives capable of giving

concrete and visible representation to that very need. Populist mentalities remain, which are also forms of derivation but which, as we have seen, do not provide the subject, the individual identity, with tools for action but only forms of passive mirroring. Let us be clear: we do not intend here at all to make value judgements on populisms. They constitute, like it or not, the contemporary register of language and of a significant part of democratic political culture. They therefore also play, in this sense, a supplementary and subsidiary function that should not be underestimated. However, this function is insufficient to give body and form to the *pars construens* of democratic coexistence.

As scholars and researchers of the calibre of James (1890), Dewey (1916), and Peirce (1958) have explained in their time, acting in itself is a source of self-construction and identity, as well as moral education. In particular, Dewey associated action, and political action itself, with a form of 'pedagogy of the self', which in a democracy is indispensable not only for the subject (which is, after all, valid in any kind of political regiment) but also for the functioning of democracy itself. Something that Tocqueville (1835–1840) had already sensed in his time when he observed that American democracy rests on the participation and civic and social engagement of its citizens. However, while Tocqueville emphasised precisely the role and importance of the social and civic aspect of participation in a democracy, the 20th-century authors we have mentioned take an additional step: they associate participatory action with the very development of the person and individual identity, something not so obvious in Tocqueville.

But here, as mentioned above, a question of no small importance arises. If, in fact, in addition to voting (on the decline), political participation is reduced simply to getting information, to sharing or relaying news, to 'cheering' in the stands (or on the curve) for one or the other actor or leader, to expressing opinions, comments, and requests to those directly concerned (i.e., to leaders and politicians in general), then the contents, languages, and messages conveyed by politics risk re-proposing those of the stadium. This in fact happens today. True, as we have seen, the self and the active identity manage to find their way to civic and social engagement. But can this be enough for democracy to function?

To date, this is not sufficient.

This is for a reason, which concerns the functioning of the social system as a whole. In an open society, in a democratic society – as we have seen – individuals are only allowed a modicum of identity closure; such is the cost of being part of residual identity groups, such as conspiracists and religious or ideological fundamentalists. Since, however, the majority of people enjoy sufficient identity health (i.e., they are not in a position to have to seek existential answers as radical as those mentioned above), they (the majority) can very well continue to lead their existence by voluntarily keeping away from politics, without this affecting or threatening their need for identity. In the past, this phenomenon was known as political 'apathy' (Almond and Verba, 1963). With the increase in the level of education among citizens, political information and, consequently, interest in politics have gradually increased. But not political engagement and participation, at least in the period we are living through, nor in the traditional forms and repertoires. We explained the

reasons for this above, in reconstructing the epochal transition from mass society to the demassified society of the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, the individual, as we have also seen, found alternative and substitute avenues to politics in order to fill any gaps in his or her identity. Social and civic engagements respond perfectly to this kind of need. One would therefore say that in a democratic society, the individual can manage to solve his or her identity problems in many different ways, which do not necessarily fall within the realm of politics. But is it possible to affirm the reciprocal? In other words, and here we return to the question: *can a democratic society function well without the commitment and participation of its citizens?* The answer to this question refers to two sets of problems: that of representation and, referring back again, that of identity. Let's see how.

The problem of the representation deficit is not, or not directly, about the presence or absence of sufficient political actors in the democratic arena. It is not about that. It is not a political issue. The real problem is that those actors and voices have neither a face nor a sound in the ideal representative assembly of a democratic political system. The fact is that they just do *not exist in the collective imagination*, even though there is the potential for someone to bring them out of the nothingness in which they currently find themselves. And here we return to the relationship between residues and derivations.

We all have residues (passions, feelings, social instincts: e.g., sympathies, antipathies, aversions, propensities, fears, expectations, hopes, desires, nightmares, dreams) but often lack sufficient derivations (frames of meaning, sense, justification, and legitimation) capable of recomposing political and social identities in a widespread and recognisable manner in the groups present in society and, at a final level, in society as a whole. We do not have them because political, cultural and communication personnel cannot – and in any case would not know how to – do this job, which in the past was done by specific elites, who did it, and did it well. Instead, today the rather blurry outline of meaning and significance bobs erratically from beneath the surface before finally emerging from the indistinct confusion of the course of events and things. But this happens magmatically, in someone's attempt, often born and aborted in a short time, to frame and give a face to expectations and ideals *in nuce*.

This state of affairs is a situation that Talcott Parsons (1961) had already accurately described in his theory of social change. As far as certain sectors are concerned, and *in primis* that of information, we are, essentially, in a period of as yet undefined *specification*. This means that the new social needs and functions that have emerged in recent years do not yet have at their disposal social sectors and operators endowed with the sufficient normative, ethical and value structure capable of fulfilling their tasks at the level reached by more mature sectors, but above all capable of acting as a transmission belt between the instances of moral sentiments and their representation at the level of well-defined ideas. It may, therefore, only be a matter of time. When the first political newspapers appeared in Europe, the headlines and the style they adopted were as far removed from an ideal and value of correct and scrupulous information. Then, with time, national newspapers emerged and spread, and although oriented, assumed a role of credibility and

verifiability that was previously completely absent. The example of newspapers could be applied to many other media, with the exception of radio and television, which came into being, at least in Europe, at the initiative of national governments.

The lack of sufficiently defined and focused sets of ideas, representations, and imaginaries does not satisfy the need for identity on a political level. This important level of collective recognition, in its absence, weakens social identity. This, in turn, reflects its weakness on the political level, also due to a recently regenerated and therefore still decidedly immature information system. It is, in short, a vicious circle that, if unbroken, can have damaging consequences. The problem, as we have seen, is not solved by the closed social identities proposed by some populist or, worse, authoritarian mentalities. Open societies rest on open identities, on pain of seeing their moral and legal foundations undermined. When we recalled the Parsonian analysis of the dynamics of change, we gave an optimistic reading, which we believe is the most realistic.

However, there is also another reading, not to be taken lightly. If in fact, sooner or later, action is not taken in order to give face and voice to moral sentiments without representation, the risk is the progressive loss of awareness of the *value of democracy*. In other words, it could happen, as has already happened in the past, that the current blurring of democracy (a ‘blurred’ democracy) could, if not refocused in a not-too-distant future, affect the public’s ability to react to possible internal or external threats to democracy itself. Threats are not recognised as such because they are among citizens no longer equipped with eyes capable of distinguishing their contours.

## Notes

- 1 We use the expression ‘commonly understood’ here to refer precisely to the end of the 15th century, reported in all school textbooks and university manuals as the watershed between the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. Let us point out, however, that there are historical-sociological readings that backdate the first signs of the modernisation process to the birth of autonomous city-states in Italy and other European regions from the 11th century onwards (cf. Pellicani, L. 1994, *Genesis of Capitalism and the Origins of Modernity*, Telos, New York; Millefiorini, A. 2015, *L'individuo fragile. Genesi e compimento del processo di individualizzazione in Occidente*, Apogeo-Maggioli, Sant’Arcangelo di Romagna).
- 2 For Pareto, second-class instincts, which he termed ‘aggregate persistence’, consist of that grouping of drives linked to the need for the preservation of traditions, customs, and ancient and established institutions. For example, a movement such as Forza Nuova is characterised by a strong presence of second-class instincts, such as the desire to stick to distinct sexual identities and the traditional Catholic religion.

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## 6 Claiming the social in freedom

*Massimo Pendenza*

Freedom without others  
would be like swimming without water,  
breathing without air, art without spectators,  
or employers without employees

(Somek, 2015: 125)

### Introduction

The main aim of the chapter is to discuss ‘freedom’ and how it can be sustained by the State. The issue, however, is that the concept of freedom is associated with totally different, even partially incompatible, visions. As a result, political, economic and social freedom need to be discussed so that each is clearly distinguished, with the help of the classics of sociological thought. Starting from Weber’s proposal of the State – from which a contrast with (political) freedom seems to emerge – we examine two alternative theoretical visions, each holding the common belief, however, of the State as an organism that gives impetus to individual freedom. One is German ordoliberalism, which triggers the cue to delineate the freedom that can be defined as economic, while the other is the Durkheimian proposal, with which it makes sense to speak of social freedom, currently – especially on the part of Axel Honneth – in a phase of revival. While the former is emblematic of the market-oriented, self-responsible individual in competition with other individuals, the latter is a type of freedom that is expressed by an individual responsibility towards others and conditioned by social commitment. If political and economic freedom are indebted to the classical ‘liberal’ tradition (Constant, 1819; Berlin, 1959; Bobbio, 1995) – not examined in depth here – which interprets freedom as the removal of obstacles and external constraints to the realization of autonomously set goals and intentions, social freedom has different roots, as it claims the value of the societal and solidarity dimension, in addition to, and not opposed to individual freedom. In other words, it claims the value of the ‘social’.

### The bureaucratic State and *political freedom*

Undoubtedly, the State is at the heart of Max Weber’s political thought. It recurs as much in his early writings on agrarian economics and methodological essays as in his special sociologies and political writings. In the *Basic Sociological Terms* (Weber, 1978 [1922]: 54), he affirms that ‘a compulsory political organization with continuous operations will be called a “state” insofar as its administrative staff successfully uphold the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force



in the enforcement of its order'. In other contexts, it is instead presented respectively as a 'relation of rulership', as the 'complex of specific joint human action', as a 'machine', as a 'tangle of value ideas', as a 'legal order' or as a bureaucratic apparatus. Despite this centrality, as pointed out by Anter (2014: 202), the State is never treated by Weber as a topic in its own right, but always, and only within, a sociology of power, also converging within a comprehensive and systematic conceptualization. Although an abiding interest in State theory transpires from his lectures on the *Sociology of the State*, there is, however, no trace of a specific *sociological* methodology to be found permeating Weber's work. And when such does emerge, it is always an action-oriented sociology of the encompassing kind, so that, for Weber, the State can be defined not so much as a monolithic entity but rather as a 'complex of actions' to be found in the power relationship between rulers and ruled, thus coercive, although *legitimated* or in search of *legitimation*.

This is especially evident in *Politics as a Profession*<sup>1</sup> (Weber, 1994 [1919]: 309–369), Weber's *Conference* to the students in Munich on 28 January 1919, where the concept of the State is treated briefly within the sociological category of 'political agency' and the typologies of 'legitimate domination'. To the first category, that of 'political agency', the German scholar dedicates more space, also because it constitutes one of the objectives of the *Conference*. Weber attributes to this category a clear semantic delimitation in order to better distinguish it from the category of 'bureaucratic agency', that is those who administer laws in exchange for remuneration. He does so because he is aiming, above all, at the acts of the 'political leader' (p. 330), of the politician who, by vocation – that is by innate qualities – is called upon to play the role of 'chief', capable both of controlling the bureaucratic apparatus and of directing command towards ends endowed with value. In short, it is an action that takes place where the subjectivity of ends, the objective undecidability of choices and the inevitable bias of a decision begin, which – precisely for this reason – require meaning and provide meaning. In other words, the 'place of Politics', where the exercise of power meets the polytheism of values and is expressed through conflict.

When Weber then goes on to define the State idealistically, in the third paragraph of the *Conference*, he does not hesitate to emphasize the point, peremptorily declaring that the State – like any other political institution – 'cannot be defined sociologically in terms of the content of its activities' (p. 310). This is not only to avoid removing the boundaries that curb value judgments and thus undermine his own faith in the principle of *avalutativity*, but also because – the text explicitly states – he considers it *unthinkable to define the State according to purposes*, since these are so many and varied, as well as changeable and subject to judgement, that they can in no way serve as an ideal-typical characteristic. That is why, according to Weber, 'the modern state can only be defined sociologically in terms of a specific *means*, which is peculiar to the state, as it is to all other political associations, nominally physical violence' (*ivi*). Hence, the precise and well-known definition of the State, by virtue of which, according to Weber, it would be nothing other than 'that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a specific territory' (pp. 310–311).

The term 'monopoly' is crucial because it enables us to distinguish the State from other human associations, be they criminal organizations or kinship groups. These, in fact, can impose their will by force, but what is 'for the specific feature of the present', says Weber, 'is that the right to use physical violence is attributed to any and all other associations or individuals only to the extent that the *state* for its part permits this to happen'. The state is held to be the sole source of the 'right to use violence' (*ivi*). In other words, for Weber, the State can only be defined in relation to the means it uses and *not* the ends it pursues, and that means *physical violence*, of which it holds the exclusive right within a given territory. It follows that in order to verify that one is in the presence of a social phenomenon classifiable as a State, it is essential to ascertain who holds the monopoly of force.

Regarding physical violence, however, Weber is keen to point out that it is *only* the *specific means of the State* and therefore neither the *normal* nor the only one available to it. This clarification elucidates a fundamental concept for him, namely that before using force, the State must first refer to the *value choices contained in the legitimate norms*, that is to the *validity of the rule of law*. And it is here that he recalls the 'types of legitimate domination', the other sociological category mentioned previously.

As is well known, Weber discusses three types of domination: 'traditional', typical of authority based on *custom*; 'charismatic', typical of authority that enjoys personal *gifts of grace* of an extraordinary nature; 'rational', by virtue of belief in the validity of legal statute and the appropriate juridical 'competence' founded upon rationally devised rules. The recourse to the types of domination is the final step in Max Weber's reconstruction of the notion of the State. It is the crux of its legitimacy and, more generally, the issue of consensus, that which serves to justify political institutions and decisions. If the State is essentially a power relationship between those who command and those who obey, between the dominant and the dominated, it is, in the long run, necessary that those who are invested with political command and demand obedience for themselves must be legitimized and therefore accept that their exercise of power is based on an 'inner justification'. The State is indeed not only the place where the relations of domination and force of individuals over others (the struggle) are constituted but also the place where the authority that the dominant claim to have, and to which the dominated voluntarily submit, is based on norms created for a purpose and replaceable with others. Having clarified this last point, perhaps what is Weber's broadest definition of the State can be found in the very pages of *Politics as a Profession*:

[T]he modern State is an institutional association of rule which has successfully established the monopoly of physical violence as a means of rule within a territory, for which purpose it unites in the hands of its leaders the material means of operation, having expropriated all those functionaries of 'estates' who previously had command over these things in their own right, and has put itself, in the person of its highest embodiment, in their place.

(Weber, 1994 [1919]: 316)

This definition offers the opportunity of posing a further question: what legitimacy does the 'highest embodiment' of which Weber speaks feed on? In the modern State, there are certainly problems of legitimation and political representation. Weber confines himself to stating that the State has no purpose (only 'politics' does). Yet this is not quite the case. In *Basic Sociological Terms* – as we have seen – Weber not only likens the State to capitalist enterprise, stating that the state is 'a compulsory political organization', but also specifies that its 'administrative staff', that is that subject (bureaucracy) with claims to a monopoly of legitimate use of physical force, *acts* 'in the enforcement of its order' (Weber, 1978 [1922]: 54). In other words, although Weber repeatedly wants to expunge the idea of an end or a purpose from the definition of the State, he, nevertheless, traces the contours of such purposes in the implementation of 'orders' – to be carried out without recourse to legitimate force, save as a 'last resort when others have failed' (*ivi*, footnote 1) – and, in addition, by ascribing this task to administrative personnel. This latter aspect, however, leaves still unanswered the question of the kind of value orientation the State should carry. Certainly, for Weber, the 'interest in order' is a contribution, first and foremost, to the formation of that central instance of the State which, in turn, invokes the legitimacy of the monopoly of physical violence with the consequent guarantee of security, protection and internal peace. However, this is an outcome with which Weber himself is dissatisfied. Firstly, because it modifies and objectifies the purely personal, charismatic call of the *Beruf* into a function of a mechanism completely independent of the value of the person; secondly, because it transforms the State, precisely because its legitimacy consists in being only a formally rational means, into a bureaucratic organization voiceless on real political direction. We could suggest, tentatively speaking, that in its formalistic impersonality, in its operating *sine ira et studio*, without regard to the person, the legitimizing force of the bureaucratic medium of the State poses Weber with the *dilemma of the freedom* of the individual in modern societies and how this may be configured in relation to the legitimacy of bureaucratic power. His problem, in other words, is how to reproduce the original 'spirit', something that neither bureaucracy as such, nor its representative par excellence, the official, is able to do; the official cannot take personal responsibility for a 'cause', because enforcing his own cause through the medium of bureaucratic legality is the specific task of the 'directive spirit' of the politician, the 'leader'.

Although Weber never elaborated a systematic idea of 'freedom', he has, nevertheless, given us a fairly comprehensive summary description of his thoughts on the same. This can be found in *Parliament and Government in a Reconstructed Germany*, where he states:

Given the basic fact of the irresistible advance of bureaucratization, the question about the future forms of political organization can only be asked in the following way: 1. How can one possibly save *any remnants* of 'individualist' freedom in any sense? . . . 2. In view of the growing indispensability of the state bureaucracy and its corresponding increase in power, how can there be

any guarantee that any power will remain which can check and effectively control the tremendous influence of this stratum?

(Weber, 1978 [1922]: 1403)

Weber is a firm believer in the individualism of human rights, but, above all, he is a supporter of freedom from power, especially administrative power.<sup>2</sup> For him, 'freedom' is *freedom from the bureaucratic State*, therefore fundamentally *negative*. He believes that – even if he believes that bureaucratization marks the destiny of modern societies to become an 'iron cage' – the ultimate meaning of politics should still be to oppose instrumental rationality, to steer the bureaucratic State in a political direction, and to guarantee the existence of political institutions called upon to ensure spaces of freedom removed from the control of administrative power. It is a question of freedom *from* administrative power, which, on closer inspection, is also a freedom of *the* political, in the sense of open action that the political decision-maker takes in view of ends. In this way, the freedom of which Weber speaks is *also a positive* freedom, insofar as it is an autonomous and propositional activity of action in view of responsibly chosen ends. This is exactly what the official is unable to do because of his role. In other words, if on the one hand Weber feels the need to emphasize the necessity of *negative* freedom, against the tyranny of formal rationality, on the other, he is also aware of the fact that the politician (and politics) possesses the instruments for, and the will to, act *responsibly*. The *political* freedom of which Weber speaks is therefore simultaneously 'freedom *from* (administrative) power' and 'freedom of *the* political', two sides of the same coin, both expressions of a request for private autonomy from administrative bodies that, in the specific case of the citizen, is transformed into a request for spaces not regulated by power. This, according to D'Andrea (2019: 175), is Weber's main 'political' argument in favour of capitalist private initiative, as well as a criticism of socialism, which he considers far from being a factor of emancipation, but rather of the total and uncontested domination of bureaucracy.

For Weber, the State and institutions are legitimate bodies and are legitimate only if they are anchored to the value of freedom understood as a space of personal possibility, as a struggle against the forces of destiny and chaos generated by the polytheism of values. An *individual freedom, positively* understood, therefore, that supports those same institutions but only if they, in turn, can nourish such spaces of freedom. Or otherwise risk their own dereliction. This is why freedom, as intended by Weber, is *political* in the full sense of the word. It is political not only because it tends towards emancipation from political control, towards withdrawal from any form of political regulation, but also because it is, for individuals, a capacity for meaningful action – a source of meaning for the individual of late modernity which, for Weber, however, has religious roots. In 'freedom of conscience', typical of the ascetic-protestant sectarian movement, he even considered the *primus mobile* of the 'freedom of the moderns':

Such freedom of conscience may be the oldest Right of Man – as Jellinek has argued convincingly; at any rate, it is the *most basic* Right of Man because

it comprises all ethically conditioned action and guarantees freedom from compulsion, especially from the power of the state. In this sense, the concept was as unknown to Antiquity and the Middle Ages as it was to Rousseau's social contract with its power of religious compulsion.

(Weber, 1978 [1922]: 1209, *our italics*)

Weber was interested in the extent to which this originally religious freedom could be preserved in modern societies. His interest even took on the appearance of an obsession with the diminishing potential for human freedom.

*Political freedom* is not, however, the only freedom that can be accounted for, whose peculiarity – as we have seen – is to show hostility to authority and meaningful action at the same time. We can examine at least two others, *economic freedom* and *social freedom*, which we will consider, from just as many theories on the State, to be united by the fact that they place on this body, the propulsive task of their public legitimization; the former exalted by German *Ordoliberalism*, an economic-political current of thought that emerged in Germany in the 1930s; the latter, stemming from Durkheim's reflections on the *cult of the individual*. Comparing them is not merely a purely scholarly exercise; on the contrary. Despite the contextual and contingent nature of their arguments, there is no doubt that the two conceptions/concepts are anchored in today's reality, that of Europe, for example or that of the populist drift, for which individual freedom springs more from a judgement of the nation or the people than from an individual sense.

### The ordoliberal State and *economic freedom*

Ordoliberalism – defined in detail by Foucault (Foucault 2008 [2004]) in his seminar lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 – originated in the 1930s within the so-called Freiburg School and the research program led by the economist Walter Eucken and the jurist Franz Böhm.<sup>3</sup> What was postulated at the time, in conjunction with the full advent of capitalist society, was a kind of 'third way' – beyond the *laissez-faire* of classical liberalism and economic planning – viable thanks to the 'liberal interventionism' of the State, which would have the task of subordinating the democratic order to the proprietary order by means of a regulatory framework within which the market economy would have to function legally, competitively and in a manner consistent with human nature. Central, therefore, to the early theorists of Ordoliberalism was individual free enterprise, which had to be preserved against all political interference: 'freedom' meaning exactly what in the eyes of this eminently economic school of thought? For the latter, in brief, *freedom within a framework of economic-legal order*, constructed and maintained by a political authority, the State, to govern social interests and support the spontaneous action of individuals, without which the individual cannot be conceived as a human being. In other words, for ordoliberals, the State is important and is indeed conceived as *strong* (Eucken, 1932), vigorous, and legitimized on the premise that social order is the *condition of* freedom and that freedom is a matter of political organization.<sup>4</sup>

Such conception of State and freedom, in line with ordoliberal theory, is the antithesis of von Hayek's or Milton Friedman's vision, to which it is often and erroneously associated under the label of 'neo-liberal theory'. By convention, while the latter is associated with deregulation, especially of financial markets, and with a *weak and non-interventionist State*,<sup>5</sup> gradually withdrawing after the incorporation of the logic of the market and becoming 'competitive' itself, for ordoliberals, the safe conduct of market freedom presupposes a *strong State*, providing the necessary regulatory frameworks to integrate entrepreneurship into society at large. Put differently, for ordoliberals, the free economy is essentially a practice of government, resulting from a political decision that establishes a legal space of norms – an order – within which the market is allowed to evolve harmoniously in a regime of perfect competition and monetary stability.<sup>6</sup> If the ordoliberal problem is therefore how to sustain market freedom, the answer lies in the ethical State, whose task is to facilitate the viability of liberal values in the face of 'greedy self-seekers' (Rüstow, 1932: 255, translation from German) and the interests of antagonistic classes. In this sense, to guarantee freedom through the promotion (and not the defence) of enterprise and entrepreneurial freedom constitutes for ordoliberals the 'public duty of the State' (Müller-Armack, 1979: 146, 147).

What the ordoliberal theory is in practice is an inversion of the relationship between the economy and the State, one in which the visible hand of the public authorities is called upon to intervene, to support, and pacify the market and to transform the laws of the market into the laws of the State. An inversion already pointed out by Foucault (2008 [2004]: 162), when he states that in Ordoliberalism, it is not the juridical that is a superstructure of the economic, but rather the opposite. Foucault, as is well known, then develops the discourse in the direction of bio-politics, of government action that acts as a policy of life, but which in ordoliberal language was already indicated by the term *Vitalpolitik* (Rüstow 1961 [1951]). And the *social market economy* (the name by which today we designate Ordoliberalism), developed by State action, is a project of *Vitalpolitik*. It is a social policy that rejects the demands of collective forms of welfare in favor of a human economy of self-responsible social enterprise (herein lies the meaning of 'social'), which is obviously not something 'naturally given', akin to Smith's idea of the natural human propensity to exchange and barter. Rather, self-responsibility is actively sought and constructed by individuals with the help of the State, so that it takes on the appearance of a liberal project: a project that aims to empower society through the responsible use of economic freedom, with the aim of integrating entrepreneurship, private property, and the free-price mechanism into the social fabric and preventing the proletarianization of social structures (Röpke, 1996 [1944]: 51 ff. and 239 ff.). Freedom, affirm the ordoliberals, in other words, comes with responsibility. This is why they conceive of society as a corporate society composed of self-responsible entrepreneurial individuals, regardless of their social position and economic status, while advocating a 'liberal interventionism' of the State (Rüstow, 1932: 65). A State that acts with vigour, that creates a social order based on the principles of individual freedom and perfect competition, and that undertakes to protect it by means of market laws made legal.



It is thus clear that the special character of Ordoliberalism consists essentially in vigilant State intervention and the legal prohibition of obstacles to competition. In other words, the competitive order must be constructed and maintained by an *Ordnungspolitik*, an active and ordered form of politics. Wilhelm Röpke (1996 [1944]: 28), one of the main architects of *Ordnungspolitik*, stated, for example that ‘a satisfactory market economy, capable of maintaining itself, does not arise from the fact that we do nothing with energy. It is rather an artistic construction and an artifice of civilization’. Röpke repeatedly used the metaphor of a sports competition to explain this principle. In the absence of agreed and punctually enforced rules, he said, any competition would degenerate into a violent clash. In his view, the task of the State would therefore consist in acting as referee, constantly intervening, imposing sanctions for anti-competitive behaviour and producing, in essence, what Bonefeld (2012, 2017) summarizes as ‘state-centred neo-liberalism’. That is, the competitive order must be constructed and maintained by an *Ordnungspolitik*, an active and ordered form of politics.

### **Moral State and social freedom**

Freedom founded not on competitive order or liberation from impediments, but on the recognition of human dignity and social justice is different. This can be derived from Durkheim’s reflections on the State, which refer to a freedom that, in the modern era, emerges when there is social justice and where the State plays a functional role in this relationship, assigning rights and powers to individuals and protecting equitable social relations through regulation. We define it as *social*, given that it is compatible with the societal level, recently reworked by Axel Honneth (2014 [2011]) from his considerations on the ethical elements of actualized socialism.<sup>7</sup>

Of ‘freedom’, Durkheim speaks little, our knowledge derives indirectly from certain passages dedicated to the State (Durkheim, 1953 [1906], 1973 [1899–1900], 1986 [1958], 2003 [1950], 2014 [1893, 1902]) – from the task he entrusts it with, to ‘liberate individual personalities’ – and to social justice (2003 [1950]).<sup>8</sup> From the former, we grasp the relationship that binds this organism, complicit with society, to the determination of the individual and thus to his freedom, a task that Durkheim considers ‘principal’, because it is primary with respect to the external task of defending the national collectivity from foreign aggression, or the internal role of handmaiden of the national economy (Lukes, 1973; Giddens, 1986; Stedman Jones, 2001; Pendenza, 2014).<sup>9</sup> From the latter, we interpret instead the importance of social regulation when, oriented by moral individualism, it operates to redress the inequalities produced by human nature, with the State, once again, serving the cause through the expansion of human rights and legislation (Barmaki, 2014). Entering into the merits of the State, Durkheim does not consider it an abstract pact-forming event as the liberal tradition requires, but rather the outcome of a mutual recognition between social groups, possibly thanks to the voluntary constitution of porous borders that limit their autonomy, in order, however, to achieve a common horizon from the broadest totality. Conceptually, the State is defined as an authority constituted and exercised within a differentiated and pluralistic society,

carried out by a distinct group of officials who think to the greatest degree of consciousness about how to direct the collectivity (Durkheim, 2003 [1950]: 47). The State has the task of thinking reflexively – at the highest level with which a political society thinks itself – through entirely particular representations, and of directing collective conduct accordingly. It is thus not a mere spectator of social life, but ‘the very organ of social thought’ (p. 51) and, precisely because of this, specialized. It must not so much increase one or another formal doctrine as *enhance the moral nature of the individual*. This is a ‘peaceful and moral’ action, the result of a development of the most evolved societies, which supports and promotes the cult of the individual, which Durkheim now considers the subject of the new civil religion of society. Thus, he states, if it is true that the moral reality today is the individual, it is also true that ‘it is this that must serve as a point of reference for both public and private conduct’ (p. 56). The State must serve what society commands it to – *the positive support of individual freedom* – and its function, essentially, is to liberate the individual. This, means safeguarding his rights, whereby, Durkheim points out, ‘the stronger the state, the more the individual is respected’ (*ivi*). In other words, he believes that its presence is a condition of possibility for moral individuality, since, he concludes, ‘it is through the State, and the State alone, that they [the individuals] have a moral existence’ (p. 64).

It is therefore implicit, for Durkheim, that the emergence of the individual and his emancipation follows phases of chronological succession and is not the result of an *a priori* and dogmatic definition. The ‘freedom’ he understands is not inherent to the nature of the individual as such – as in the conception of freedom of the ‘moderns’; it is not, in short, a ‘property’ of his – but it is historically determined, and, above all, it is a willingness to submit to society. In fact, Durkheim affirms:

The individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation. . . . By putting himself under the wing of society, he makes himself also, to a certain extent, dependent upon it. But this is a liberating dependence. There is no paradox here.

Durkheim (2010 [1953]: 37)

Central to this quote is the fact that ‘freedom’ is not an elementary anthropological datum but a historical and social creation: the ‘product of a regulation’ that must be recognized as just by individuals, who accept it as legitimate and agree to limit their desires only because they feel they are receiving it ‘from an authority which they respect, to which they yield spontaneously’ (Durkheim, 1951 [1897]: 209). It follows that for Durkheim freedom does not lie so much in escaping the constraints exercised by social forces and constraints – as understood by classical liberal thought, in particular, in its definition of ‘freedom from’ (Berlin, 1959) – but rather in the autonomy of action made possible precisely by belonging to society. A freedom that is certainly *depowered*, because it is a mixture of intentionality and containment, the effect of a reciprocal self-limitation of individuals,<sup>10</sup> but which presupposes the positive recognition of belonging to the same objective reality, society, through the State. With the latter not commanding, but translating ‘the



mental life of political society', which is plural. And what does it translate? Not conceptions aimed at 'negative' freedom, the prevention of each of invading the personal sphere of action of the other as the contractualist tradition requires, but conceptions oriented to the cult of the individual, the new modern morality according to this latter (Watts Miller, 1996; Callegaro, 2016; Pendenza, 2022, 2024). A strong State that is a guarantor of 'negative' freedom, which does not give vent to an absolute freedom, 'ordoliberal' laws, but rather to a 'positive' individual freedom constructed from and within social relations. It is not interpreted from an individual understood as a logical presupposition but rather as a social-historical product, a bearer of social instances that requires for its explicit expression the intervention of the modern state.

Therein lies the reason why the Durkheimian conception of freedom is alternative to the liberal and ordoliberal one: why *social freedom* is different from *political* and *economic freedom*. Durkheim does not reduce freedom to the abstract idealism of the market nor to a struggle against the limits set by social constraints. His idea of freedom is based on the individual: not abstract, but a 'social person', not the bearer of interests, but of rights. Rights are always in constant change, which are, for him, the true vector of social aspirations, expressions of an increasingly widespread demand for social justice and 'sympathy for all that is human, [of] a wider pity for all sufferings, for all human miseries, [of] a more ardent desire to combat and alleviate them, [of] a greater thirst for justice' (Durkheim, 1975: 64). This also explains why the task of the State appears to him to have 'no limits' (Durkheim, 2003 [1950]: 68). Once the socio-historical conditions that allow us to think of the individual as a human person are considered, its task cannot, in fact, be limited to the achievement of a defined ideal, apparently defined in a series of natural rights. Rather, this task should be to express and consolidate the evolving feelings of justice that permeate societies, at least as long as the process of self-transformation continues (Callegaro and Marcucci, 2018: 8).<sup>11</sup>

Axel Honneth (2014 [2011], 2017a [2015], 2017b) shares Durkheim's view that individual freedom is not 'freedom-from-others, i.e. negative, but with others', one for which autonomy of action is made possible precisely by belonging to a community. He defines it as *social*, as the free individual fulfilment of an 'us' whose maintenance is made possible by all those who cooperate with their respective contributions. In this different sense, freedom is 'social' because individual freedom is subordinated to relationships with other subjects. And where 'social' is understood in the strong sense of *general will*, in the sense of a common intention to remove obstacles in the way of a freedom practiced in a form of solidarity through reciprocal actions and of sharing common aims and values. This is a tradition that Honneth retrieves above all from the writings of Marx and the early socialists,<sup>12</sup> those, to be clear, for whom there is no contradiction between the principles of the French Revolution and for whom, consequently, the liberal concept of freedom must be broadened to the point of making it compatible with that of 'fraternity'. This is, again according to Honneth, an unresolved conceptual knot, especially for those who believe that the normative objective of fraternity – of being in solidarity with one another – cannot be pursued together with the other objective, that of freedom,

conceived exclusively through the category of private selfishness reflected in the relations of competition of the capitalist market. Honneth's view is different, however, because he not only considers the two goals compatible with one another but also regards social freedom as even the guiding objective for a revival of socialism as a project for future society. A society in which the establishment of a new form of community life is a priority, in addition to and not different from the one in which an attempt is made to impose a better and fairer system of distribution.<sup>13</sup>

Social freedom is then not a mere possibility offered to subjects to realize their intentions conceived in a purely individualistic and private sense so that mutual ties and obligations may be described as latent threats, but rather something in which it is only thanks to the presence of a regulated framework of interaction that autonomy can extrude itself. In this sense, there is individual (i.e. 'social') freedom only where it takes on an 'objective' form (*à la* Hegel) such that other members of society are no longer seen as potentially responsible for a limitation of their own intentions to act but rather as cooperative partners necessary for its realization. And it is from here that freedom derives its *social* character, in that the individual voluntarily takes part in the collective practice of a community in which all the members show that they participate for each other, to the extent that, for the sake of others, they help each other to realize the well-founded needs of each.

Against the accusation of collectivism to which such freedom could be subjected, Honneth is keen to point out that it is a freedom not aimed at stifling individual autonomy given that it concerns above all the conditions for the realization of individual freedom. At the same time, he is convinced that it is different from the freedom exacted by traditional individualism because it is subordinated to participation in a certain kind of 'social community'. But which community? Here, another theoretical chapter opens up that is not easy for Honneth to resolve, but which he solves by relying on the arguments of Brudney (2013), as well as Raz (1986). Thus, 'social' are all those communities characterized by the fact that the goals pursued by their members are related by 'interconnection' rather than by 'intersection'. We have 'intersection' when the subjects pursue objectives, admittedly shared together, unattainable as a unit unless the content of the individual aims is also shared at the same time; we have 'interconnection', however, when the objectives of the members of the society require that they collectively contribute to their attainment in such a way that each individual adopts them as a maxim or as the end of his action. In interconnected communities, subjects do not simply act with each other, but rather 'each other' since they want to contribute directly and intentionally by their activities to the achievement of the goals shared by all. While in the community united by intersection, *my* actions contribute partially to the goals and are in any case a contingent consequence of *my* particular aims; in the community with interconnected goals, the same result is achieved as a necessary consequence of the aims *I* intentionally pursue. So that only the latter is a 'social community, where an equally 'social' liberty operates, one in which not only opinions on collectively shared values and a certain degree of identification with the group's aims are considered but also, and above all, because it places the members of the group mutually for each other and includes the sympathy felt for

all. Unfortunately, unlike Durkheim, Honneth does not grasp the importance of the State as a generator of conditions for social freedom, for example of shared norms, but focuses all his reflection on the collective self-determination of rules and reflective intersubjectivity, taking it from Dewey and Habermas, who are essential points of reference in this tradition.

## Conclusions

While Weber's definition of the State is still influenced by nineteenth-century legal formulae, the ordoliberal and Durkheimian conceptions of the State interpret the latter rather as a social construction in search of legitimacy, today partially translatable into the Bourdieusian formula of 'the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and *symbolic* violence over a definite territory' (Bourdieu, 1994: 3). Such formulae express a great desire for the State, indeed for a strong and proactive State, which determines the very conditions of individual freedom, not understood as a 'constitutive attribute of man'. What differentiates the Ordoliberal State from the Durkheimian State, however, is the social and ethical framework from which the State draws the resources to promote, and take charge of, freedom: for the Ordoliberals, this is a framework that incorporates self-entrepreneurship, an economic freedom of the individual responsibly called upon to avoid the proletarianization of society; for the other, which we derive from Durkheim, this framework promotes a task fit to meet the needs of cohesion and social justice, respectful of the inviolability of the individual, of their rights, and attentive to their relationships. The first outlines an order suited to economic freedom, which is called upon to operate mainly in the economic sphere, albeit with more general claims; the other, an order based on the general will, which responds to the civil evolution of society and which considers the economy as a particular sphere of society. A freedom that Axel Honneth has called 'social' and that is only realized insofar as it is also and, above all, an 'intersubjective freedom'.

## Notes

- 1 In the article, I use the title 'Politics as a Profession' to address the lecture, even if the current English translation reads as 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics'.
- 2 The same contrasting relationship can be found between religious freedom and the Church as an institution, which, insofar as it administers the dominion of souls, in fact resembles the State.
- 3 For a history of German Ordoliberalism, see Rieter, Schmolz (1993). For Dardot and Laval, 'Ordoliberalism is the German form of neoliberalism' (2013 [2009]: 101).
- 4 On this point, see Bonefeld (2012, 2017). Streeck (2015) also notes as a main feature of Ordoliberalism the centrality attributed to the state and links it to the notion of 'authoritarian liberalism' of the German social democratic jurist Hermann Heller (2015 [1933]), itself coined as a comment on Carl Schmitt's (1998 [1932]) project that a *healthy economy* presupposes a *strong state*.  
Of note is the differing opinion of Galli (2019), for whom the ordoliberal perspective is one that intercepts Schmitt *only insofar as* it focuses on the neutralization of the conflictual dynamics of modern society and the distinction between state and society, while

- when it pursues neutralization and distinction with an economic purpose (i.e. saving capitalism by making the market the producer of social bonding and balance), it cannot be subordinated to Schmitt's 'politics'.
- 5 Hayek (1982, Vol 2: 8) criticized State intervention because of 'the impossibility for anyone of knowing all the particular facts on which the overall order of the activities in a Great Society is based'.
  - 6 In *Die Grundlage der Nationalökonomie* (1947) – a text in which Eucken, one of the most authoritative exponents of the ordoliberal school, systematically elaborates what would become the theoretical foundations of Ordoliberalism and the *social market economy* in post-war Germany – the relationship between State and society is defined through the concept of 'economic order' (*Ordnung der Wirtschaft*).
  - 7 Honneth uses the same expression but with a different meaning, also considering the fact that his reference is not Durkheim but Hegel and Marx.
  - 8 It is difficult to account, even indicatively, for the endless secondary literature on Durkheim's State, justice and the moral individual. Of all of them, we can at least point out Watts Miller (1996), Stedman Jones (2001) and Callegaro (2015). It must then be said that, with few exceptions (Marske 1981; Callegaro 2016; Pendenza, Lamattina 2019), this is literature that never dwells on the theme of 'freedom'.
  - 9 It should be noted that this is a relationship detached from that linked to the modern imaginary articulated by the fundamental concept of the State and limited to the legal perspective of 'power'. Indeed, from Max Weber onwards, almost all definitions of the State emphasize the territorial dimension of State power (Tilly 1990).
  - 10 Parsons (1960: 146–47) has aptly described what Durkheim means here with the example of the Catholic and the Protestant.
  - 11 This is also why Durkheim believes that unfair rules are the cause of immense suffering and social conflict, which the State can contain through social legislation. To then avoid overflows of power by the latter, he suggests that it, in turn, be controlled by the forces of secondary professional groups (civil society). Although, finally, he is sceptical about the ability of nation-states to rise above their national selfishness and act for the greater good of an international entity, humanity, he nevertheless does not consider it impossible to accomplish (Pendenza 2014).
  - 12 Although he recognizes in Hegel's concept of 'objective' freedom the origin of the notion of social freedom, and in Dewey a developer of the same (Honneth 2017b: 185).
  - 13 In later works, Honneth (2017b) goes even further, considering social freedom to be the very foundation of social coexistence.

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**Part three**

# **Imaginaries of democracy in the 21st century**





## 7 Democratic political culture: from ideologies to social imaginaries

*Ambrogio Santambrogio*

### Introduction

This essay offers some reflections upon the conditions and assumptions of a socially produced democratic political culture, with two broad aims: firstly, to outline the conditions necessary to strengthen participation; secondly, to restore centrality to political initiative, which, today, lags behind the accelerated pace of international markets and neo-liberal economic processes.

### Political culture

We begin by clarifying the distinction between *political culture* and *political cultures*. Distinctions can also be found in other spheres: an economic culture that does not correspond to economic cultures; a religious culture independent of religious cultures; an artistic culture that differs from artistic cultures; and so on. Broadly speaking, we can suggest that political culture (in the singular) is a normative dimension widely diffused and shared within a given social group. Political cultures (in the plural), on the other hand, are the product of a reflexive and conscious working of thought, which produces various and alternative theoretical positions. Liberalism, socialism, Marxism, conservatism, populism, etc. are all different political cultures, mostly produced by limited cultural circles (professors, intellectuals, politicians, theorists, etc.) and which constitute real intellectual traditions, the reconstruction of which requires considerable, structured, and often conflicting hermeneutic analysis.<sup>1</sup> Each of these cultures can influence the political culture of a particular group or social formation.

There are, therefore, on the one hand, autonomous cultural traditions endowed with their own internal reflexivity, which self-nurture and self-reproduce over time (Rawls' theory can be seen as an internal proposal of the liberal tradition, for example); on the other hand, there are groups and/or collective identities that are constituted and maintained over time because they are also characterised by a political (but also religious, artistic, economic, etc.) culture. All this can be investigated empirically: those who study the political culture of the Italian populace will also seek to identify the political cultures that have played a role in its formation, which makes it different, for example, from the political culture of the French.

This approach – that of political culture in the singular – has a long tradition. Research by Almond and Verba (1963, 1980) on the notion of civic culture is one of the most notable examples. Almond and Verba give civic culture three typical functions:

- 1) to act as a chain of transmission between the *micro* sphere – individuals – and the *macro* sphere – society;
- 2) to provide subjects with a set of shared attitudes underlying their political behaviour;
- 3) to include, through these shared attitudes, three different dimensions: cognitive, affective, and evaluative.

In short, political culture is the set of individual attitudes towards the political system.<sup>2</sup> This approach is open to criticism in several respects: since political culture is seen as a set of individual attitudes, it is not clear how it can act as a bridge between the micro and the macro; since it is something that makes the system stable, it fails to explain change; it does not take into account the social stratification of individuals, seen as equal bearers of a common civic culture; participation is only electoral, and individuals are only seen as voters. The model of reference is that of classical liberal individualist democracy based on universal suffrage, whose best realisation is the American one. These are well-known problematic concerns, whose underlying origin is found in the Parsonian model.<sup>3</sup>

This essay's author proposed an alternative model to the functionalist, phenomenologically inspired model (cf. Santambrogio 2023). Political culture, from this alternative perspective, can be seen as that part of common sense belonging to the political sphere. I believe that the phenomenological approach (cf. Schütz 1962, 1964, 1966, 1972, 1996) is compatible with the analysis of social representations (cf. Moscovici 1961, 1984): the two models compose an elegant and articulate theoretical framework, capable of accounting for both the stability and the changes of shared symbolic universes and able to provide an effective tool for empirical research.

For Schütz and phenomenological sociology, common sense constitutes a typical set of cultural models available to individuals, characterised by opacity and irrelexivity: it is the world we take for granted. A fundamental distinction introduced by Schütz is that between intentionality and reflexivity.<sup>4</sup> Our everyday actions are intentional, but do not require reflection; that is to say, *we act without thinking*. When I stop at a red light, my action is intentional, but it is not the result of reflection; that is, I do not stop to think what I should do, I just do it. Intentionality contains the meaning of action, but it contains it opaquely and unreflexively, as part of the uninterrupted flow of everyday temporality. That is why, as Schütz argues, meaning is the reflexive exit from temporal continuity: “the very awareness of the stream of duration presupposes a turning-back against the stream, a special kind of attitude towards that stream, a *reflection* as we shall call it” (Schütz 1972, p. 47).

To grasp the meaning, it is necessary to halt – metaphorically – the duration of the moment, the passing of time and life. The subject must stop and reflect, think

without acting: why am I here? What is the meaning of my action? Intended meaning “is merely an operation of intentionality, which, however, only becomes visible to the reflective glance” (ivi. 52); and reflexivity is the way in which intended meaning appears, the way in which I become conscious of it.<sup>5</sup> By taking a reflective point of view, I become aware of the intentionality present in the unreflective experience. Intention can be opaque, unreflective, or it can appear to me reflexively. Through reflexivity, what seemed obvious is observed: it is the process by which the subject, turning his attention to his past experience, constitutes it, and no longer merely experiences it, as endowed with meaning.

Within unreflected intentionality, the subject lives in the typical realm of the ordinary, of what is common, what we take for granted. Social life is ordinary, familiar life. The typifications that constitute it are relatively consistent with each other, so as to provide a framework that, in turn, is relatively stable and ordered. Change is the result of the frictions between typifications and of their mutual inconsistencies, but, above all, of the reflexive activity of the subject, who, in always unpredictably, can draw to the surface of his consciousness taken-for-granted contents. Their appearance to the reflective gaze is the necessary, although insufficient, premise to bring about change. Reflection is exercised in an ever-hidden and opaque substratum: a completely transparent world would no longer be a social world. It is therefore possible to conceive in common sense of a juxtaposition between more fully sedimented contents with greater insensitivity to reflexivity and other contents, not so profound but that are more open to reflexivity so that we can distinguish between *deep common sense* and *ripples of meaning*. These are the extremes of a *continuum*, ranging from a maximum of resistance to reflexivity to a maximum of meaning available to the subject’s reflexive consciousness (cf. Santambrogio 2023).

The subject of the relationship between stability and change of symbolic universes can introduce the theory of social representations. For Moscovici, a decisive role is played by the more reflexive scientific universes and their impact on collectively shared common sense. In his first important piece of research, Moscovici shows how psychoanalysis penetrates deeply into the way the French think, through two processes: *anchoring* and *objectification*. At first, psychoanalysis anchors itself to pre-existing contents of meaning, and is seen as a form of confession, in the sense of religious sacrament. Then, as it proceeds to acquire its own autonomous content, it acquires its own objectivity, with the result that younger, more secularised generations see in confession a form of psychoanalysis (cf. Moscovici 1961). In a manner akin to the concept of deep common sense, the Aix-en-Provence school went on to develop the notion of the *central nucleus*: social representations have an inner resistant nucleus that shapes the entire cognitive structure, and then they have outer, more mobile, and variable elements (cf. Abric 1984, 1993). A sociological interpretation of this structure may be given by linking it to the varying degrees of generalisation and diffusion enjoyed by social representations: *stereotypes* are universally recognised (although not always universally shared); *attitudes* are typical of certain specific social groups, but not of all; *opinion* identifies the subjective level, within which a greater or lesser degree of autonomy with respect to attitudes

and stereotypes may be found. Stereotypes, central nucleus, and deep common sense can be thought of as tending to converge (cf. Santambrogio 2023).

The contents of a political culture – its objectifications, to use Moscovici's terminology – may be located in three different dimensions: *symbols*, *values*, and *options* (cf. Santambrogio 2023). Symbols constitute the symbolic aspect of politics: think of slogans, flags, myths, songs, coats of arms, etc. – the sphere that nourishes the realms of ritual and identity. Party congresses, demonstrations, rallies, etc. are moments in which the symbolic dimension of political life is staged. Values, however, are more reflexive than symbols: think, for example, of the differences between those who focus on individualistic values and those who focus on community values or the gulf between universalism and particularism. Finally, options constitute a set of cultural models that are predominantly operational, closer to, and more influential on direct political practice. These are guiding ideas for effective political practice, very close to the issues that make up a concrete political agenda. It can be assumed that moving from symbols to options goes from a maximum of opacity to a maximum of reflexivity: questioning our own symbols and myths tends to be a harder task than pondering the alternatives dictated by everyday political practice. These are different ways of testing one's own identity: whole peoples bow before a flag, but it proves difficult for a weighty option – for example, to be for or against a majority electoral system – to stir collective passion.

The phenomenological model briefly presented here may be an excellent tool for the empirical study of political culture considered a part of common sense: to it, the characteristics of opacity and irreflexivity should be added; the internal structuring between deep political culture (central nucleus) and ripples of meaning (peripheral nuclei); the processes of anchoring and objectification; the interconnection between intentionality and reflexivity; the distinction between symbols, values, and options. Viewed this way, political culture becomes a – more or less important – part of our everyday life and not only functional at election time, as the functionalist approach tends to have us think. The phenomenological approach is useful for interpreting an increasingly widespread and profound process: the social becoming of many aspects and dimensions previously considered pertinent only to the political system. It will therefore be useful to see how the relationship between political culture, in the singular, and political cultures, in the plural, has changed and is changing.

### **Political ideologies**

Picking up on Moscovici, we need to understand the role that science has on our way of thinking, especially today. In the past, this role was played mainly by religion, which built around it much of the socially shared common sense; today, this role is also shared by other spheres, within which scientific knowledge has growing importance. The question can be formulated as follows: how do political cultures influence political culture? How does the liberal political theory of Kant, or Rawls, influence our democratic political culture? What is present in our thinking today of Marx's political theory? Political cultures are characterised by a high level of

reflexivity; they must meet internal criteria of coherence and non-contradiction; they are mostly the result of a conscious production process. Political culture is mostly unreflexive; it can also have internal inconsistencies; it is the result of a mostly unconscious production process that belongs to everyday life. It is useful to think about the existence of an intermediate dimension, which mediates between the reflexivity of theory and the unreflexive intentionality of political culture, between Kant and Marx (or, if you prefer, between the liberal and Marxist political traditions) and widespread political culture.

This essay thus proposes a historical-sociological hypothesis: in a society whose social stratification coincides with the division into classes, there is a dimension that acts as a mediator, as a bridge between political theories and political culture, and it is that of *ideologies*. The latter can be considered as symbolic universes intermediate between theory and common sense. Here we have the problem of finding a key to the study of the *production* of political culture and not only its *reproduction*: it is a question of understanding, in contrast to the functionalist approach, not only how shared symbolic universes are maintained but also how they change, which must ensure the relative stability of a political system yet account for the possible birth of new horizons. Once ideologies have been assigned the function of mediating between theory and political culture, they must then bring in new symbolic content, which comes from theory, so as to constitute innovation and also have the function of maintaining a degree of stability within widespread political cultures. This dual function, in my opinion, is possible because ideologies are the expression of a cognitive dimension that is less reflexive than theory but more reflexive than political culture.

The concept of ideology is among the most highly debated and the most controversial. In current times, there seem to be two perspectives: firstly, ideology as a distorted, false thought to be unmasked in the wake of Marx, with various interpretations; secondly, ideology as a set of positions, ideas, concepts, symbols, and attitudes. In the first, it is necessary to defend the theory of unmasking;<sup>6</sup> in the second, the actual usefulness of the term ideology. If feminist, ecologist, animalist, pro-European ideologies exist together with those that are liberal, populist, catholic, marxist, socialist; if we speak of the ideology of the Greek *polis* as we speak of absolutist monarchies, of totalitarianism and of democracy; if, essentially, the term 'ideology' may be thus extended so that ideology may be anything, then simply nothing is. The so-called end of ideologies, repeatedly announced last century, is an expression of the difficulties that both positions bring with them.

For our purposes, we reconstruct the debate starting with Mannheim, perhaps the first to declare, already in *Ideology and Utopia* (1997), the end of ideologies. Mannheim distinguishes between a *particular* and a *total* conception of ideology. The first is typical of the Enlightenment: it is a matter of showing our interlocutor that he is wrong. And it is possible to do this by arguing, on the assumption that rational subjects are able to recognise their own errors and, when cornered, also their own lies. In an Enlightenment critique, there is no distinction between good faith and bad faith: the force of the best argument – here we deliberately use a

Habermasian term – is able to shed light and put the other in a corner.<sup>7</sup> Mannheim speaks of a particular conception because no one can presume to be always right: if today, and for the moment, with my arguments I have been able to convince my opponent, I must maintain my willingness to be convinced in turn. Ideology is thus a science of ideas, laying the foundations for a progressive, but ineluctable, collective exit from error.

Marx turns this idea on its head: according to Mannheim, Marxian innovation lies in attributing to certain social positions, at certain historical moments, the impossibility of thinking correctly. He then switches to a total conception of ideology. The bourgeois is always in the wrong: at a certain stage of development of the productive forces, a determined particular – the bourgeois class – is forced to present itself as universal if it wants to maintain its domination. But a particular forced to present itself as universal is false. The critique of ideology consists in unmasking a false universality.

Class conflict, however, sharpens minds, and the technique of unmasking spreads, revealing the social conditioning of all ways of thinking: from the bourgeois point of view, even the proletariat is but a particular, and its belief in itself as an expression of the universal is an entirely instrumental rhetorical artifice. If the technique of unmasking consists in showing that ideas are socially positioned expressions of particularities, then no idea can be universally valid. I unmask you, and you unmask me, both of which lead the others' ideas back to their own particularity. This leads to a *general use* of the total conception of ideology: mutual unmasking leads to the futility of the technique itself, to distrust in the possibility of having a non-ideological point of view. The end of ideologies is the impossibility of accusing any worldview of being ideological, producing an obvious relativism: we are now simply faced with different worldviews belonging to different social subjects.

Mannheim thinks that his sociology of knowledge – which recognises the mutually connected nature of being and thought – can provide a solution to the problem of relativism, a very dangerous enemy of democracy, precisely because dictatorships and totalitarianisms feed on the insecurities and fears it produces. Mannheim uses the term ideology to interpret a symbolic system connected to a social class: ideology is therefore the expression of a society divided into classes, within which conflict also manifests itself as mutual unmasking. For Mannheim, we have three ideologies (conservatism, liberalism, socialism) connected to three social classes, those that express the social conflicts typical of a certain historical period (nobility, bourgeoisie, proletariat). Once the classes end – that is, the structure of social stratification changes – which for Mannheim occurred after World War I – ideologies also end.<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of our argument, it must be emphasised that ideologies understood this way are linked to, but do not coincide with, reflexive theories. An important contribution of Mannheim's is in having shown that being and thought are linked in different and interconnected ways: Marx's theory, to give an example, from theory must become ideology – in the sense just outlined – in order to be available to the working masses. Intellectuals, journalists, men of action and



party workers, trade unionists, and so on are committed to this transformation: this is how that process of *political socialisation* takes place, which constitutes the intersections between the political system and society precisely because it can count – in a society divided into classes – on the production of complex and interconnected cognitive systems such as ideologies. They mediate between reflexivity and intentionality, between theory and political culture: striking workers can rely on arguments in support of their actions without having the burden of cognitively possessing the fascinating mysteries associated with the Marxian theory of alienation.

Thus emerges the intermediate character between reflexivity and intentionality typical of ideologies. With respect to theory, they make it possible to translate this into everyday language, bringing it into play not only in the intellectual arena but also before all the necessities of everyday action;<sup>9</sup> with respect to widespread political culture, they are not a product of the unconscious adaptation that takes place within common sense, but are the result of the reflexive work of fairly well-identified subjects. In short, it is a cognitive form that must support collective identities and that must meet the specific demands that an identity needs: comprehensible and useable ideas, the ability to translate into concrete action, and valid emotional support. It is to support the same functions that attitudes have for functionalism: cognitive, affective, and evaluative.

In phenomenological terms, all this is achieved through a cognitive system that lies intermediate between reflexivity and opacity: to return to our striking workers, they take for granted an entire symbolic universe at the foundation of their protest, an entire political culture, which to them remains opaque. When necessary, however, they must also be ready at a certain point to forward reasonable arguments on the motives that drive them to the streets.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the workers' political culture – in the singular – has been nourished by socialist ideology, which, in turn, has a vast and complex theoretical production behind it. This does not exclude, of course, that other cognitive influences are present within workers' culture or that socialist ideology can also influence the political cultures of other social subjects. Mannheim's reconstruction has an ideal-typical as well as historical function: it shows various possible ways in which being and thought historically influence each other.

To summarise: in a class-divided society, ideologies perform an intermediate function between political cultures, mediating between the former's need for reflexivity and the latter's need for opacity, succeeding in guaranteeing both stability and the need for change in collective identities, provided that by ideologies we mean specific and historically determined cognitive systems, produced by the also very particular characteristics of a social conflict that uses, among its weapons, the technique of unmasking the adversary.

### **Social imaginary**

What happens after the end of ideologies, in the face of the transformation of the class-based system of social stratification? The phenomenon of ideologies can be

read sociologically as an expression of a situation in which conflict also moves forward through the ability of the various classes to give themselves their own autonomous worldview. The mixing, within ideologies, of cognitive, normative, and emotional elements allows subjects to move on different planes, from the more rational one of arguments to the more emotional one of identities. Ideology thus allows the collective taking of sides, to hold arguable ideas, and to arouse passion on the main issues of the moment, within a vision of the future. Without ideologies, then, is it not possible to take sides collectively? According to Bauman, neo-liberalism makes it impossible to move from individual choices to a collective project: from the neo-liberal point of view, and the individualism it brings with it, any dense and meaningful network of social ties is an obstacle to be eliminated (cf. Bauman 2000).

As controversial as the issue is, it is clear that we live in societies characterised by interconnected and complex social stratification. Until recent decades, being a blue-collar or white-collar worker or entrepreneur implied a precise location within the social structure, in terms of disposable income, consumption, social circles of belonging, lifestyles, political representation, generational mobility, access to education, etc. Today, these distinctions are much more fluid and unstable. Inequalities have not disappeared: the processes of globalisation and neo-liberalism are creating new forms of poverty, new modes of exclusion, and new social barriers. The problem of redistribution of resources, after the crisis of welfare policies, continues to be central. But these issues must now be expressed in a new language, closer to social reality and its dynamics.

First of all, the disappearance of ideologies does not mean the disappearance of ideas and values. Still beginning with a sociology of knowledge approach, however, a different organisation of the relationship between the structure of stratification and the ways in which new ideas and values manifest themselves must be made. As the former changes, so does the latter, and vice versa, within a dialectic in which mutually influencing interconnections can be reconstructed: we will have a change both of the forms of collective self-representation, which no longer coincide with ideologies, and of those widespread cultures, including political culture, that underpin lived experience.

In order to interpret these new processes, we can put forward here the hypothesis that, while in the era of ideologies, cultural models spilt over onto lived experience, impressing specific modes of action upon the latter, now, at the end of ideologies, the relationship has reversed. If before, in the relationship between politics and society, it was the former that dictated to the latter the political values of reference within the processes of *political socialisation*, politics has now lost this capacity and observes, generally with scant attention, what is happening in the boiling cauldron of society. The production of values and ideas has shifted from a political centrality – whose subjects were the state, parties, trade unions, institutions, etc. – to a social centrality – whose subjects have become the movements, associations, communities, etc.

This has happened for a number of reasons that characterise the structure of modern democracies. Firstly, a democracy has values of its own that cannot be derogated, and the acceptance of which has depreciated the conflictual scope of

ideologies.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, given certain common values, democracy has increasingly taken the form of a legitimate functioning mechanism, incapable of producing singular worldviews. In particular, the democratic political system – meaning institutions, parties, and leaders – seems incapable of producing new values, of collectively making sense of history. This capacity seems to have passed to civil society: if we look at the history of recent decades, we can see that the most radical innovations in terms of new values and new visions come precisely from movements. We need only think of youth, feminist, ecologist, localist, and various minority (homosexual, differently-abled, etc.) movements, no-global, and, more recently, a series of new spontaneous associations, whose main characteristic is that of being firmly anchored in associative contexts, typical of civil society.

Much recent empirical research has studied this last typology, which, among its most original aspects, often presents a conscious rejection of politics in the name of the centrality of associative micro-contexts, capable of regenerating elements of social solidarity and new ties. If we look at the *macro* dimension, we must start from the *micro*, from the everyday, from concrete and real cooperative and solidaristic logics, through a centrality of the social often complementary to a de-politicisation of our horizons of action. The links with traditional forms of political representation seem to be broken, and the world of political institutions is distant not only because it appears blind, deaf, and dumb but also because it is, at times, deliberately ignored.<sup>12</sup>

We are dealing with something that does not have a name. These are subjectivities that do not consult the old ideologies, although traces of the past can be found in their political culture. They pose unprecedented questions, linked to new models of consumption and development, to new forms of critical solidarity, to new ways of living in common, and to a new relationship with cities and territories. They do so through organisational modes that may intersect with traditional ones, especially those of the great forms of historical associationism, but which are in fact innovative and may even conflict with these. What is striking is the centrality that the moment of the relationship assumes, the importance of tangible experience within new social ties, the forms of which are built as we go along, as an expression of a general and unquenchable desire for sociality. The collective culture that is produced is the expression of a real experience; it is a culture made by doing, not a ready-made package of models available to adapt to.

A common note in this universe is an implicit, but sometimes explicit, critique of neo-liberal individualism. Personal initiative is not experienced in opposition to collective initiative but as its daily extension, while political participation – especially in the electoral sense – is increasingly distancing itself from shared experience. A new valorisation of subjectivity takes place, which coincides neither with neo-liberal individualism nor with previous ideologically inspired, sometimes totalising, collective identities. Participation is no longer an expression of strong identification but contributes to redefining identities linked to concrete social relations that are highly performative.

Since the way in which these subjects produce participation has changed from a heterodirected to an increasingly self-directed dimension, we propose the introduction of the concept of social imaginary to identify the new symbolic universes

under development. The concept of the imaginary has a complex history and contains heterogeneous meanings.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of our argument, we can start from Taylor's definition:

[B]y social imaginary . . . I am thinking . . . of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.  
(Taylor 2004, p. 23)

Again: "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004).

This definition brings the concept of the imaginary closer to that of common sense in the phenomenological tradition. We can distinguish the two dimensions, between intentionality and reflexivity. Common sense is unreflected intentionality. Social imaginaries, on the other hand, constitute, like ideologies, intermediate dimensions between reflexivity and intentionality. In my hypothesis, they perform the same function as ideologies, but they are not symbolic universes produced from above, triggering processes of political socialisation; they are directly forged by civil society and constitute spontaneously produced models of collective self-representation. This is to the detriment of their internal coherence: their lesser coherence compared to ideologies is significantly related to the fact that there is no single reference subject – such as a social class – that acts as the bearer of a unified worldview and well-defined interests.

The modernisation process, in a nutshell, does not seem to reduce the imaginative dimension of social subjects; on the contrary, it dilates and expands it. It becomes a prerogative of different subjects, who, by becoming protagonists, produce new cultural models; systems of ideas are being constructed and that seem to float above the heads of individuals, who draw down inspiration therefrom to make sense of concrete actions. These are not symbolic universes, irreducible and devoid of identity:<sup>14</sup> the different aspects that make up an imaginary, albeit at times contradictory and incoherent, can nevertheless be traced back to a denominator, capable of sustaining pieces of identity that can then be more or less coherently assembled.

A certain degree of reflexivity links these imaginaries to ideologies. The values that compose them, and the images on which they feed and with which they represent themselves, are there for all to see and are open to choice. Their manufactured character is evident: the nature of the food revolution proposed by *slow food* is well-known, by whom it was initiated and developed, who made it their own. In the social imaginary, there is a creative dimension absent in common sense. The imaginary is the result of a desire that is reflexively realised in values, world visions, and aspirations: it is a creative and mobile symbolic universe, subject to a different kind of change from that – slower, invisible, and unreflective – which characterises common sense. Moreover, and this is perhaps the fundamental difference, the imaginary is not the cement of everyday life, the opaque basic software that everyone takes for granted; on the contrary, it is perfectly visible, and, precisely for

this reason, it is used for the purpose of social change. Driving the imaginary is the creative imagination, compelled by a desire to improve an unsatisfactory world. While common sense reduces uncertainty, the imaginary, if anything, increases it. As Sartre conveyed, it is the expression of human freedom to transcend reality in the form it now takes in our current society.

The imaginary leads to both a closure (here it is recognisable) and an opening (here it is incoherent): with the former, it identifies a space within which to place one's choices; with the latter, it gives the space an uncertain and provisional character. Those involved, despite different social backgrounds, know that they can meet in the same places and share the same materials or the same behaviour despite the heterogeneity of the subjects they meet and the actions they take. They know – almost always, but in any case, significantly – how to recognise their imaginary. The inherent incoherence of the imaginary offers a much more open space for collective action than ideology. Precisely because the system of ends is not structured in mechanical consequentiality, the sense in which pursuing a certain value (e.g., better management of the environment) also pursues another (e.g., greater equality) remains entirely uncertain. An idea of impracticability, utopia, and lack of realism hovers over the imaginary.

Does the incoherence of the imaginary not then threaten the ability to make sense of history, as Mannheim said about the end of ideologies? Indeed, this is the dilemma of the social imaginary, and the dilemma of the various movements. An imaginary can identify great ultimate values, utopian in nature (equality, solidarity, recognition, environmental defence, recognition of rights, new forms of solidarity, etc.), but it can also take the form of a set of important, every day, and concrete but inevitably short-lived objectives (city gardens, solidarity actions, construction of alternative living and consumption spaces, etc.). On the one hand, it is too big; on the other, too small. It lacks the paths that can lead from narrow concrete ends to broader ends, within common values. It is a question of being able to give greater interconnection to actions that parts of civil society put in place with the values present in their collective imaginaries.

It is at this point that the political system should come into play, within a redefinition of the relationship between society and politics. During the era of ideologies, civil society was mostly heterodirected: the great ideological narratives provided social subjects with a relatively coherent and reliable representation of their place within society and social conflict, motivating and sustaining their social identity, through forms of political representation, such as parties and trade unions, capable of reconciling membership and interests. Simply put, *political* ideologies were able to provide *social* identities. Today, we must flip the question: is the *social* imaginary able to translate into *political* identities?

The processes of political socialisation must give way to those flowing in the opposite direction, which I would like to call the *politicisation of the social*. Nostalgia for the socialising function of the mass parties of the past would be futile, as would the espousing of the cause of contemporary populism. Becoming crucial, instead, is a new political role, one which is able to voice the increasingly persistent questions that civil society, of rich and complex interconnections, shaped by evolving social imaginaries, is posing today. These are issues that, in different and

scattered ways, sometimes confused and contradictory, but always with a clear and strong voice, civil society raises: the expansion of rights; the eradication of inequality; a model of sustainable development; the promotion of a circular economy, capable of becoming rooted again in the social sphere; the adherence to new models of consumption; policies of inclusion of the weak; a new conception of work and, in particular, in welfare; a new vision of the relationship with nature; the need for sociality; the criticism of an alienating globalisation; new management of human relations, of time, and of space; etc.

Are the demands of these issues destined to remain confined to the experience of those who practise different and alternative experiences of sociality in their daily lives, or can they take on general political weight? The politicisation of the social is the condition for the realisation of the second possibility. The political system must find a way to listen to and translate into policies those collective identities that, supported by new social imaginaries, are slowly under creation. In other words, a political voice must be given to everyday experiences so that the rift between society and politics does not widen or deepen further. This is not, of course, a process of colonisation that politics must carry out in relation to society: the latter continues to maintain its autonomy, its own modes of organisation and socialisation. These demands, through their organisation into a relatively coherent system of pursuable ends, must be taken to another level – that of being able to do politics, to fill today's dangerously ever-growing void of representation and participation.

The task of democratic politics is no longer to provide *identity values* but to build *identity projects* within shared values, capable of speaking to significant – and potentially majority – sections of civil society. The political system is thus faced with a twofold task: to guarantee, protect, and implement those democratic *values* and procedures that constitute the ineliminable framework of our advanced societies and to provide alternative projects through which to articulate political conflict. Values are increasingly a product of civil society, which develops them by constructing a dense *jigsaw puzzle* of intersecting identities typical of our societies; *ends* – a relatively coherent system of ends that takes the form of a political project – are the political contribution to the proper functioning of democracy.

The social sphere remains the source of the thinkability of the impossible, where imagination can continue to maintain that degree of freedom from necessity that can guarantee freedom from the present.<sup>15</sup> Only in this way is it possible for a critique to exist that thinks the unthinkable: *social critique* is free from the necessity of coherence, reasonableness, and realism. It is criticism without responsibility. It is the critique of the imagination. *Political criticism*, on the other hand, is criticism of the (in)adequacy between the individual project and its imaginary of reference and between political projects that differ from each other. In short, if the social imaginary is the world of what is possible, politics is that of what is feasible.

A final question: can social imaginaries also have an influence on political culture and political cultures? Do they fully replace ideologies in the intermediary function between widespread political culture and political cultures? Here again, we can only speculate and would need empirical support. It is clear, however, how much the action of these new social subjectivities is radically changing the widespread political culture, our common sense. One salient example is the issue of the



environment, only a few decades ago an apparently secondary and marginal question. Today, it rears up in its evidence to the collective consciousness. Likewise, the stimuli coming from these new forms of participation have triggered new reflections even within the most prominent political cultures. If that is the case, social imaginaries may have the important function of disseminating new ideas, both in the direction of common sense and in that of academic theoretical production. The hope is that they can nourish a new, democratic, widespread, and participatory political culture with content.

A renewed ability of the political system to politicise the social, inspired by the new developing imaginaries, may be a way of addressing conflicts democratically that might otherwise explode in hardly controllable ways. Within this both menacing and promising framework, the social sciences have before them an interpretative, critical task and direction that they must take on with due responsibility.

## Notes

- 1 An excellent example of a discussion of autonomous traditions is the text by Brint (2019). The author identifies three traditions of political culture studies: the French one, ranging from Montesquieu to Tocqueville; the German one, from Kant to Weber; and the American one, concerning 1960s behaviourism.
- 2 Almond and Verba identify three different types of political culture: parochial, subject and participant. The first is based on a mainly localist attitude; the second is characterised by a substantial respect for authority; the third is inspired by a high degree of political participation. Civic culture is a political culture best achieved by combining various characteristics of the three types.
- 3 Here is only briefly reference to the approach by Almond and Verba. There are, however, other important examples, among them Banfield 1970, and, more recently, Putnam 1993; 2000; Putnam, Romney Garrett 2020. Putnam and Romney Garrett's book shows how American civic culture has shifted from the strong individualism of the 19th century to the communitarianism of the New Deal, and then, especially under the Trump administration, back to the original individualism.
- 4 These are not two opposing concepts: reflexivity is the way in which the subject makes intentional meaning emerge, becoming aware of it. It is perhaps better to speak of intentionality and reflexive intentionality, thus emphasising that they are two modes of the same dimension. On the concept of intentionality, see Searle 1983.
- 5 I become conscious of this by altering my 'natural' and spontaneous relationship with time: this may be one of Schütz's great contributions to a general theory of action and understanding, a contribution that develops the Weberian notion of intentional meaning using the philosophy of Husserl and Bergson.
- 6 An attempt to maintain the concept of alienation as an expression of distorted thinking to be unmasked can be found in Jaeggi 2014.
- 7 As is well known, according to Sartre bad faith – unlike lying, whose characteristic lies in the fact that the liar is aware of the truth he is hiding – is a situation in which "it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here". In this way, "that which affects itself with bad faith must be conscious of its bad faith since the being of consciousness is consciousness of being. It appears then that I must be in good faith, at least to the extent that I am conscious of my bad faith" (Sartre 1966, 87, 89). Bad faith refers to the structure of consciousness: "consciousness is inhabited by being but it is not being: consciousness is not what it is" (ivi.105). The theme of ideology – of the more or less conscious gap between the particular and the universal – is thus transformed by Sartre into the ontological condition of human consciousness.



- 8 Of course, it is not the transformation of the social structure that causes the end of ideologies: it is a process within which structure and superstructure, being and thought, condition each other. Mannheim, who writes *Ideologie und Utopie* towards the end of the 1920s, is witness to the crisis of the working class and the advent of the masses, on which Nazi-fascist totalitarianism will rely. The phenomenon of classes will still significantly stretch across the history of the 20th century, even after World War II: it is a question of understanding whether today the link between class and ideology is still relevant or whether instead the two concepts – also because of their close connection – are no longer able to interpret today's society. To summarise: we should emphasise that, by following Mannheim, it is possible to give the term 'ideology' a specific semantic and socio-historical connotation, and refrain from using the term to identify any symbolic universe with a socio-political valence, and thus accept the idea that even ideologies – as a concrete socio-historical phenomenon – can actually come to an end.
- 9 We can think, among other things, of the decisive role played by party newspapers and, more generally, mass media. Nor should we underestimate, as a place of continuous production/reproduction of ideologies, the function that party schools have exercised, precisely of the order indicated by Weber.
- 10 It is a matter, to use Schütz, of the connection with which, within a project of action, intermediate ends (the success of the strike, to remain with the example) can be identified; more far-reaching ends (the success of the trade union dispute); up to and including the conception of real final ends (the socialist revolution?) (cf. Schütz 1972). The question of 'final ends' raises the question of utopia: according to Mannheim, the end of ideologies also brings with it the danger of the end of utopias, of the ability to form collectively a vision of the future. We can say that the phenomenological approach can also say something important on this issue, since utopia can be seen as a set of pursuable final ends (Santambrogio 2023, p148–180).
- 11 According to Gauchet, there are two models on the genesis of democratic societies: the first goes through the study of the characteristics of the starting point; the other through the analysis of social conflict. The first coincides with the American experience, of a society that is born democratic; the second with the European experience, especially continental, of societies that become democratic on a path within which democracy is itself the object of conflict (cf. Gauchet 2016).
- 12 These are associations that deal with critical consumption; co-housing; land management; urban regeneration; the weak and/or excluded; gender and/or sexuality issues; recycling; the environment; eco-villages; zero-mileage farming; urban gardens; etc.
- 13 The debate revolves around the contributions of Taylor (2004) and Castoriadis (1987). The literature is extensive, and in constant development (see Adams 2017; Alma, Vanheeswijck 2018; Diehl 2019; Hudson, Wilson 2019; Rundell 2020).
- 14 This must all become the object of empirical research. As a mere research hypothesis, I believe that some autonomous and distinct imaginaries can be identified: ecologist, pacifist, post-feminist, post-consumerist, localist, animalist, no-global, lgbt, etc. The same individuals may participate in initiatives that refer to more than a single sphere, without feeling the need to fully share the ideas of all of them, thus constituting mobile and interconnected identities.
- 15 Not by chance, the concept of utopia – understood as minimal and/or everyday utopias – has once again become central (cf. Cooper 2014).

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# 8    **The transformation of the political or the shifting imaginary of modern democracy**

*Paul Blokker*

## **Introduction**

Contemporary democracy is often perceived as in crisis or even in decline. The triumph of liberal democracy, announced at the beginning of the 1990s, seems replaced by a potential defeat. The symptoms of a democracy in trouble are various: the political prominence of forces critical of liberal democracy (often defined as populist), the increase in protests from below, sometimes violent,<sup>1</sup> the poor functioning of electoral systems, evident in increasing abstentionism, lack of youth participation, and the difficulties of producing government coalitions.

This chapter will seek to understand whether the imagination of (European) democracy is changing through such major challenges.<sup>2</sup> The focus is less on formal norms and institutions (the rich debate on populism already provides a wide range of observations and research, as well as institutional aspects) and more on cultural changes in the perceptions and imagination in relation to liberal democracy (see also Browne and Diehl 2019). I will try to indicate a potential transformation or re-alignment of the democratic imaginary and shift in the democratic imagination, that is, a shift regarding some of the central principles in the imagination of democracy (such as, e.g., regarding (electoral) representation, equality and hierarchy, the role of norms and law, the distinction between governors and the governed, the definition of the people, the perception of politics itself).

The political imaginary is increasingly discussed in the social sciences and can be defined as a “collective structure that organizes the imagination and the symbolism of the political, and therefore organizes the instituting process of the political” (Browne and Diehl 2019: 394). As Browne and Diehle rightly indicate, the political imaginary (and the democratic imaginary as a specific expression of the political imagination) opens up a perspective that focusses on the “political”, that is, the institutionalization of politics as such. The modern political imaginary contains within its own imagination a number of tensions, such as “hierarchy” (which democracy promises to overcome but is never really able to do away with, Browne 2019), or “temporality” (Diehl 2019), which not only includes the perennial tension between the instituted political regime and instituting significations that question the status quo but also brings into relief the dimensions of intergenerational

justice as well as the complex question of constituent power. The political and democratic imaginary as a concept “irritates” the mainstream understanding and representation of modern democracy and reveals its temporality as well as in-built tensions. Contemporary discussions on democracy’s crisis can hence be understood as indicating a time period in which the instituted is clashing more visibly with instituting claims, narratives, and critiques.

Social imaginaries are to be understood as hegemonic expressions of meaning in specific periods, while political imaginaries pertain to the hegemonic meanings of politics. Such hegemonic expressions always compete, however, with alternative imaginaries, which may be based on dominant imaginaries of the past or may regard the emergence of novel imaginaries (as is arguably the case with the universalistically oriented liberal-legal constitutional imaginary of the post-Second World War period). As argued by Stavrianopoulou, it is ‘through collective agency of the social imaginary that the characteristic and articulated social world of any society is created, that institutions are structured in a specific manner, that is society is given coherence and identity’. In fact,

[a] social imaginary generates worldviews and perceptions, which directly affect embodied practices and imbue the accompanying cultural forms with meaning and legitimacy. The close interlinkage between practice and imaginary becomes even clearer when the latter changes, and established practices are reinterpreted and new ideas lead to new practices (Stavrianopoulou 2013: 4).

Processes of shifting imaginaries may consist of longer-term, incremental processes in which core imaginary significations are redefined (through, for instance, processes of cultural encounter), but they may equally consist of more active confrontations or clashes between different societal forces in terms of competing imaginaries.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of some of the most pressing challenges to contemporary liberal democracy. This is followed by a historical discussion of liberal democracy, understood as a political regime formed in the post-war period. The liberal-legal political regime can be understood as rooted in a distinctive democratic imagination. The argument is that liberal democracy has taken on specific forms (a conspicuous legal dimension, a domination of politics by the economy, an internationalized dimension) that have created tensions or even contradictions within democracy. The current crisis can at least partly be understood through an analysis of the strong criticism emerging from these internal tensions. This criticism in fact frequently signals the marginalization of the principle of popular sovereignty or collective forms of autonomy and the exploitation of society and politics by economic and political elites. In the third part, the concept of the democratic imaginary is briefly explored. In the fourth part, the discussion focuses on critical reactions to liberal democracy. Briefly, the “irritation” of the existing democratic imaginary and the possible emergence of alternative political

imaginaries will be outlined. In the last part, I will suggest a sociological approach of a political-cultural nature that allows us to deepen the analysis of the structural change of the democratic imagination.

### **Post-war democracy and democratic crises**

Liberal and representative democracy is generally perceived to be in difficulty, if not in crisis, at least from the 1970s onwards (Rosanvallon 2011). A first significant problem is the increasingly evident gap between domestic democracies and *the locus* of politics and sovereignty. To put it simply, various political decisions that have an important impact on national political communities are not taken by the representatives of these communities, or at least not only by them. Relevant here are the processes of strengthening international and supranational politics, as in the case of the European Union. Also, the prominence and growing weight of legal regimes of a supranational or international nature in political and legal decision-making processes at the national level are important, as, for example, in the form of the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, through the influence that multinationals manage to bring into play in these processes. Equally, the prominent role of private actors (multinational corporations) and the role of private law (Teubner 2012) indicate the political dimensions of the global economy.

A second, related, important problem is the growing role of technocracy and non-democratic actors in the domestic political process. In this sense, there are at least two notable trends in modern societies that contribute to the depoliticization of democratic politics. A first trend concerns the role of semi-public, non-representative, or even private actors in the decision-making process regarding aspects of public importance. This trend is visible among other things in the *juridification* of politics, as is apparent in the growing role of constitutional courts and other independent institutions in modern democracies, in the incisive position of international legal regimes in domestic politics, and in the emergence of “new constitutionalism” (Gill and Cutler 2014), that is, constitutions understood as superior law, external to politics and hence not modifiable (an aspect strengthened due to mechanisms such as “eternity clauses”, Suteu 2021). A phenomenon related to juridification is the episteme that promotes objective rationality (Brown 2019), in turn placed in contrast with the ideological politics and partial interests of the parties. This objective rationality manifests itself in the “superior” knowledge of experts or in the public reason of elites.

A second trend concerns the independence of economic institutions, in particular that of central banks, and the valorization of the knowledge of independent economic experts (Mudge and Vauchez 2022). With the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008 this trend was (paradoxically) strengthened.

A third issue is the growing weight, and problematic use, of the media – increasingly in the form of digital media – in politics. This concept can be better conceptualized using Bernard Manin’s model of “audience democracy” (Manin 1997). In modern politics, people vote more and more for specific media figures and less for parties or platforms. Political communication through various types of (social)

media is prominent in politics but tends to distort public debate and hinder authentic democratic discussion and deliberation in the public sphere. In this type of democracy – of the public – media experts and media politicians tend to be dominant. Also due to the complexity of modern governance, politicians increasingly operate on the basis of discretion, and less on the basis of specific political agendas. Voters tend to respond to immediate (populist) policy proposals, rather than addressing political problems pro-actively.

A fourth problem concerns a growing disinterest in representative politics, the increasingly blurred distinction between right and left in politics, the emergence of populist movements of the right and the (radical) left, and the mainstreaming of radical right positions. Also due to the limited capacity of contemporary political parties to mobilize the electorate, the reduced capacity of states in the governance of society and the economy, and the growing distrust of citizens towards institutions, populism has gained a notable support in democratic societies. Populism can be explained as a structural dimension of democracy, and populist criticism plagues the heart of the modern democratic system (Arditi 2007). Populists prioritize “ordinary” people and popular will, have an anti-elite and anti-establishment attitude, and often promote forms of direct democracy. Recognition of the specific relationship between populism and democracy (*primarily* because of the importance of the *demos* for both) means that populism cannot be understood merely as a pathology of modern democracy. Populism consists of a partial, often unbalanced and potentially risky vision of democracy, placing emphasis on the emancipatory and liberating aspects of democracy, while the differentiated, pluralist character of modern societies is downplayed or rejected.

Populism tends to emphasize majority rule and the unity of the People-as-One (Lefort 1988), to the detriment of pluralism, opposition, and the institutions of constitutional democracy, including the rule of law (Urbinati 2014). One way to understand the transformation of post-war democracy is expressed with the notion of “post-democracy”. The concept links some of the issues discussed, and argues that consolidated democracies move towards a political regime in which elections and political parties remain central and important, but at the same time experience a significant decline in political legitimacy and public trust in institutions (Crouch 2004). Post-democracy is closely connected to post-industrial society, in which industry is still important, but the dynamism of the economy is found elsewhere. In post-democracy, in short, democracy still exists in a formal sense, but important political decisions are made elsewhere (by business lobby groups and economic elites) (Crouch 2004). Post-democracy sees public electoral debate as a tightly controlled spectacle, in which professional experts (*spin doctors*, etc.) manage election campaigns, influence the media, and carefully “produce” political leaders, leaving little space for the public, who is perceived in a passive sense, as a spectator, and not as a participating actor. A conspicuous dimension in this model is the role of governments, and in particular that of elites, and the relationship between political and commercial elites. According to this vision, in recent times, politics follows above all economic interests, or is even “cannibalized” by it (Fraser 2022). Crouch’s position has important affinities with that of the American political

philosopher Sheldon Wolin, who formulated the concept of *managed democracy* or “controlled democracy” (Wolin 2017). Managed democracy consists of a democratic state deeply intertwined with commercial enterprises, and in which electoral politics is limited, grassroots participation discouraged, and the public manipulated through media and advertising companies, intimately linked to political campaigns and governance. In other words, the state increasingly operates like an economic corporation. An important inspiration for the idea of controlled democracy is a series of events that occurred since September 11, 2001. Controlled democracy also indicates a further challenge to modern democracy, that is, the justification of the significant limiting of democracy due to external challenges. These challenges include not only terrorism, migration, and economic crises but also, as seen in 2020, health challenges. Managed democracy addresses these challenges by limiting human rights (e.g., mobility, freedom of expression, freedom of demonstration) and significantly increasing the power of the executive.

### **Trends in post-war democracy**

There are indications that the idea and project of democracy are changing shape in the collective imagination and consciousness. The post-war project of democracy, achieved through the institutionalization of political representation and based on the universalism of law and the realization of socio-economic progress, is encountering various forms of radical contestation and criticism. In this section, the argument is that such criticism consists in part of a reaction to processes internal to liberal democracy itself.

Among the issues briefly discussed above are two particularly conspicuous structural trends that make postwar liberal democracy unbalanced and subject to such internal tensions. First, the anti-totalitarian origin of post-war democracy has led to a dominant role of judicial institutions and legal norms (especially in terms of human rights, but not only). This tendency is often characterized as juridification or, more strictly, as judicialization (Pederzoli and Guarnieri 1997).

Second, especially from the 1980s onwards, the economy has become increasingly independent from politics and has even become an actor that plays a direct role in defining political action and stipulating norms. In this, the executive appears, among the most important political institutions, to be the one that has seen its democratic capacity for intervention for government purposes emptied the most or where democratic government is increasingly compromised in the name of (minority) economic interests (the field of environmental policy is a clear case in point).

Regarding the history of modern democracy and a critical analysis of its transformations, the works of Marcel Gauchet offer pertinent insights. Gauchet provides us with a critical reading of law and human rights in democracy, without denying the fundamental role of law as such. Rather, Gauchet shows, through historical and critical analysis, how human rights in particular constitute a new language of democracy, which undermines the political project of democracy itself. For Gauchet, rights, and law in general, form the heart of the rational form of modern society (Gauchet 2017: 278, 284). In fact, “the ideal of law” lies “[in] the ideal of the



complete and rational codification of social relations” (Gauchet 2017: 284). In his historical analysis, Gauchet highlights how human rights – intrinsically individualistic – undermine the collectivity or community. The “human rights revolution”, which began especially from the 1970s onwards, saw the emergence of a new type of democracy, “legal democracy”. The process of juridification lies not only in the strengthening of independent legal institutions but equally in the forms of social interaction and in the perception of politics, dominated by the narrative of human rights and by the emphasis – which is at the heart of human rights themselves – on individual autonomy (Gauchet 2017, 2018; see Souillac 2005: 22).

Human rights are not a new concept in contemporary democracy (as elaborated by Gauchet in his analysis of the French Revolution and the parliamentary debates of the late eighteenth century in *La Révolution des droits de l'homme*). Human rights, however, have only in recent decades become dominant, becoming the only political language available in modern democracies (see Moyn 2011). This is due to the collapse of the social-democratic project in the 1970s (and, with it, of the “social question”) and, at the same time, the bankruptcy of the only alternative to capitalist democracy, the “really existing” communist society. Indeed,

the extraordinary revival of the idea of human rights signals an important intellectual turning point within the “*république des lettres*” and in the circle of the old militants: a new orientation, if not an ideological rupture of decisive importance. A disastrous regression, some will certainly say. A grandiose restoration will others say, not necessarily better inspired. A significant symptom with multiple aspects, in any case, which deserves to be analyzed.

(Gauchet 2002: 31; author’s translation)

The momentum and popularity of human rights in the context of authoritarian systems, such as in East-Central Europe and in the former Soviet Union, are evident, but, as Gauchet argues, the value of human rights seems less obvious in democratic societies (2002: 32). According to Gauchet, in fact, human rights potentially form an “instrument of mystification to make us swallow the pill of a necessarily minimalist politics: have you seen the Gulag? So, don’t ask too much” (2002: 33). Human rights cannot define a political democratic project in themselves, because “if by politics we mean an action that seeks to provide itself with the means adequate to its goals, then human rights, it cannot be repeated enough, *are not a policy*” (2002 [1980]: 33; emphasis in original).

For Gauchet, human rights are incapable of solving real social problems and cannot contribute to the formulation of a project for a more just, free, and equitable society (Gauchet 2002: 34). In Gauchet’s analysis, human rights contribute to the decline of political potential. In other words, rights do not reactivate a project for modern society that is based on the principles of justification and truth found in society itself rather than transcendental norms. Human rights tend to replace politics in the juridification process and are claimed to consist of supra-political norms. In a critique of the vision that sees human rights as the basis of modern democracy, Gauchet evaluates the dominant, individualistic, and juridical approach as

weakening the “capacity to deliberate and make decisions in common” (2002: 246). As Gauchet argues, “[t]ransforming human rights into a politics meant, in short, condemning oneself to collective impotence” (2002: 246). When human rights become a policy, as Gauchet argues, it is not a democratic and open policy, but a form of closed politics, in which the fundamental principles are external to the political discussion itself:

Human rights have truly become, and on a grand scale, what I feared was inevitable, with all the attendant risks, namely a policy: worse, the soul and anchor of all politics.

(Gauchet 2002: 247; author’s translation)

It is in relation to politics that we must understand Gauchet’s statement that “[a]side from being insufficient to define a policy, human rights, by becoming the fundamental active principle of democracies, have ended up revealing the profound reason for their difficulties to transform into a political” (2002: 243). The political dimension of human rights, or the relationship between law and politics, consists in the suppression of both socio-historical collectivity and democratic politics. Today, according to Gauchet, law and human rights claim to define the whole of democracy (Gauchet 2002: 250). A current example is the crisis of the *rule of law* in the context of the European Union, in which democracy is equated with the rule of law (Blokker *et al.* 2021). Human rights replace political and social conflicts and debates and are political in a negative, ideological sense, obscuring the possibilities of democratic debate and the imagination of alternative social arrangements.

Turning to the dimension of economic domination, Gauchet identifies an important affinity between human rights and economic institutions in terms of the necessity of the “network society” and “information society”. The rights that support the globalized economy do not, however, contribute to a political project that seeks to radically change social structures and increasingly evident inequalities. This observation is of great importance: the enforcement of human rights tends to consist of a return to a *status quo ex ante* in the case of individual rights violations. Human rights seek to “correct injustices, without the sterile ambition of transforming the entire social system to modify every single mechanism” (2002: 260). Human rights have become the only ideology, or the last of ideologies (Moyn, 2011), or a “single ideological paradigm” (2002: 266). Rights must support a fragmented society, without collective subjects demanding emancipation and regeneration. Human rights are, in this, the perfect counterpart for a completely diversified, atomized, individualized society, what Gauchet calls the “society of individuals” (Gauchet 2002; Braeckman 2008).

The second trend, towards an independence of the economy, has important affinities with the process of hyper-individualization and depoliticization that Gauchet describes in the context of human rights. In the neoliberal economy, the dominant principles are individual choice and competition. The institutions have as their main task the guarantee of competition, which should lead to efficiency and the complete satisfaction of the different desires of citizen-consumers (Doyle 2017).

Democratic politics focuses on conveying the economic mechanism that leads to the production of the required goods and necessary public goods. In this sense, politics is based on the fragile foundation of so-called output legitimacy.

As we will see in the fourth section, the forms of populism that have emerged more and more clearly from the 1980s onwards frequently criticize liberal democracy for its tendency to distance popular sovereignty (even more clearly in the case of supranational institutions) and for the loss of control over the destiny of the national political community. In other words, the liberal-juridical, international imaginary that underlies today's European democracies is criticized for its consequences in terms of collective autonomy and political inclusion of citizens.

### **The imaginary and democratic imagination**

A democratic imaginary can be defined in analogy with Cornelius Castoriadis' idea of social imaginary significations (Castoriadis 1987; Gaonkar 2002). According to Castoriadis, the historical self-constitution of a society occurs in a series of ways that involve the representation of society to itself, or, in other words, the institutionalization of an imaginary social meaning (Castoriadis 1987). The latter can be reformulated as an "enabling but not fully explainable matrix, through which people imagine and act as collective actors, constructing the world" (Gaonkar 2002: 1). In the words of Castoriadis,

Why do we find, in every case, at the heart of this imaginary and in all of its expressions [we find] something that cannot be reduced to the functional, an original investment by society of the world and itself with meaning – meanings which are not "dictated" by real factors since it is instead this meaning that attributes to these real factors a particular importance and a particular place in the universe constituted by a given society – a meaning that can be recognized in both the content and the style of its life (and which is not so far removed from what Hegel called "the spirit of a people")?

(Castoriadis 1987: 128)

The democratic imaginary can be understood as a "space of inscription, where claims of equality and freedom can be inscribed and extended to more and more spaces" (Norval 2007: 97). The imaginary dimension of democracy consists of institutionalized meanings that make democratic institutions "natural" for participants (Terrier and Wagner 2006: 217; Taylor 2003). However, existing meanings can always be challenged by radical imaginaries that seek to reveal the constructed or unnatural nature of institutionalized meanings and to "push" these in new directions (Norval 2007).

Democratic imaginaries "articulate politics" in two ways (Arnason 1989: 28; Gaonkar 2002: 4). First, imaginaries create the "shape" or "form" of politics (offering implicit representations or understandings). Second, imaginaries provide "access" to politics (envisioning the cultural tools and identities necessary for political action). In other words, a specific democratic imaginary offers an

articulation of democratic politics that imposes a distinct political form. Furthermore, it provides cultural-symbolic meanings and democratic subjectivities that allow interaction and participation within this political form.

In the modern era, the democratic imagination includes two fundamental dimensions or “meta-dimensions”. The first meta-dimension is that of the rational, functional, and constitutional order which emphasizes stability, predictability, and efficiency (Arnason 1990; Canovan 1999; Cohen and Arato 1992; Eisenstadt 1999). This first imaginary component is elitist (Cohen and Arato 1992), functionalist (Arnason 1989), and constitutional (Eisenstadt 1999). In this constitutional democratic imaginary, “democracy is characterized by a continuous competition between different leaders or political entrepreneurs, by the possibility, as Karl Popper states, of sending ‘bad’ rulers home and, as Joseph Plamenatz claims, by a free competition for power” (Eisenstadt 1999: 15).

A well-known scholar of populism, Margaret Canovan, following the philosopher Michael Oakeshott, speaks of the “politics of scepticism”. This type of politics, or main aspect of (liberal) democracy,

is suspicious of both power and enthusiasm, and has much lower expectations of what governments can achieve. For its supporters, politics has no higher goals beyond maintaining order and reducing opportunities for conflict. For this style of politics, the *rule of law* is crucial.

(Canovan 1999: 8)

In fact, as the well-known sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt claims,

[s]uch a definition emphasizes the crucial role of constitutional solutions and the system of rules connected to them as a founding element – or perhaps *the element* – of democracies, that is, the core of prerequisites essential to their functioning and persistence.

(Eisenstadt 1999: 16; emphasis in original)

On the other hand, the second meta-dimension, that of the emancipatory or participatory imaginary of democracy, favors civic participation, rather than that of formal rules and institutions. This dimension involves radical emancipation, and places emphasis on participation, autonomy and freedom. The ultimate goal of democracy is inclusion and governance of the *demos*. In its most radical perception, democracy is understood as direct. In this “politics of faith” (the term is Oakeshott’s; Canovan 1999), “politics is understood as something to achieve perfection or salvation in this world” (Canovan 1999: 8). According to Eisenstadt,

following the custom of classical Greece, it defines democracy as the government of the many – as opposed to the government of the individual or of oligarchies – and emphasizes the principle that democracy is effective only in the presence of active and, possibly, constant participation of large sectors of

the population in the political process. The “many” are therefore the citizens, whatever definition of citizenship we want to use.

(Eisenstadt 1999: 17; author’s translation)

The emancipatory imagination – the principle of self-government – manifests itself in democratic grammars and more concrete and defined political actions in different ways. In the republican version, the highest expression of the community’s civic duties is the continuous deliberation of the public good. In the communitarian or participatory versions, participation in as many spheres of society as possible is crucial (e.g., with regard to work), and the emphasis is on the local level of self-government and less on the general level of representation as in the constitutional imagination (Eisenstadt 1999: 17–18). In both perceptions there is an emphasis on autonomy or self-governance through ongoing participation.

Specific democratic discourses tend to make a single imaginary prevail – the constitutional one or the emancipatory one. This prevalence can result in the obstruction of democracy as self-government. The constitutionalist idea can degenerate into a purely formal and procedural vision of democracy, in which the effective and significant participation of citizens is paradoxically reduced in the name of fundamental rights and the safeguarding of them by administrators (an effect increased due to the juridification of politics). In the case of the emancipatory imagination, if interpreted in a “Jacobin” way, direct democracy can lead to authoritarian or totalitarian forms of democracy (Lefort 1988). If the people are understood in an excessively homogeneous way, conflicting and dissident voices are suppressed. Both the imaginary of order and rules and regularity and the emancipatory imaginary are fundamental for a “virtuous” democracy (Hendriks 2010). Faith and enthusiasm are essential to counteract the ritualization and bureaucratization of democracy; scepticism or pragmatism is fundamental for reducing expectations and the risks of uncontrolled political will (Meny and Surel 2001: 34).

The trends discussed above can be understood as part of processes of institutionalization of a historical democratic regime. The political imagination that consolidated in the post-war period contains an important legal component, which strengthened from the 1970s onwards. The legal component downsizes the political, parliamentary component of modern democracy. With the decline of the welfare state and the fiscal crisis (Habermas 1976), the political dimension changes further due to the loss of confidence in the ability of formal politics to govern the economy and society. The governance of the economy is considered a technocratic-scientific commitment, distant from political or ideological choices (Blokker 2014).

Globalization, which became increasingly stronger at the end of the twentieth century, caused both the manifestation of supranational forms of institutionalization (including forms of international law) and the fragmentation of national societies. Consequently, the link between democratic imagination and collective commitment to the realization of a common project has become increasingly less evident. If, as Christoph Möllers, among others, argues (2010: 177; see also Arnason 1990), an “adequate functioning” of constitutional democracy is based on both

a juridical-institutional component and a component of popular sovereignty, then institutionalized democracy of the post-war era increasingly manifests an imbalance. In other words, the dimension of law, of the *rule of law*, of legal institutions, and of independent institutions (such as central banks), also in the name of the challenges of globalization, is strengthened, while the dimension of party, parliamentary, and participatory and the dimension of self-government are increasingly marginalized.

Recognition of the current state of imbalance of modern democracy is a fundamental starting point for a critical analysis of its very state of health. Cornelius Castoriadis considered so-called advanced democracies as “liberal oligarchies” already a few decades ago (Castoriadis 1991: 231), indicating an important loss of collective autonomy. Yaron Ezrahi has also reported a significant erosion of collective political imaginaries of constitutional democracy (Ezrahi 2012: 8). For Sheldon Wolin, the submission of political-democratic power to the power of economic corporations and the infiltration of politics by the logic of the market lead to a “managed democracy” (Wolin 2017).

For others, autonomy as a central dimension of the political imagination has lost its hold on contemporary democracies, leading to a “lack of political imagination” (Karagiannis and Wagner 2012: 26). Autonomy is increasingly replaced by forms of “closure” to participation, particularly due to technocratic governance but also due to an increased emphasis on security concerns. The imaginary of technological and technocratic mastery is increasingly dominant, but also the imaginary of human rights as a- or non-political instruments has gained traction. These imaginaries support a-political or depoliticized perceptions, as reactions to the insecurities of contemporary societies, partly also due to “social acceleration” or “*high-speed society*” (in itself, at least partly the results of globalization) (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009). In particular, in relation to the dynamics of globalization and increased international interdependence, modern societies are increasingly subject to phenomena of change, causing perceptions of insecurity and risk. Social acceleration can be understood as consisting of technological and innovative acceleration, social change and increasingly accelerated everyday life (Scheuerman 2002: 353).

The political imaginary’s loss of collective autonomy and the formal institutionalization of political power are clearly – as noted above – linked to the advance of neoliberalism as a radical form of modern capitalism. The neoliberal form, which emerged in the 1970s, can be related to radically individualized perceptions of autonomy and self-realization (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Furthermore, neoliberalism provides forms of technocratic governance (Mańko 2017), which in themselves contribute to the depoliticization of public space, especially in terms of civic participation and social solidarity. Political processes are secondary to economic dynamics and the mantras of growth and profit (McAfee 2019: 84). The current complicated situation is made more understandable when we look carefully at the link between democratic politics and neoliberal capitalism: the decline of democratic politics is also a consequence of the emergence of the idea of radical market society and the radicalization of individualism (even through human rights,

according to Gauchet). At the same time, we must recognize the political dimension of capitalism itself. The economy has always been constituted in a political way (according to Joerges *et al.* 2005, the economy is a political order). Regarding the dominance – and resilience – of neoliberal capitalism, it is argued that there is both a lack of political imagination (in terms of articulating alternatives) and a closure of the economic imaginary in terms of depoliticization, in the sense of an active denial of the need for a public discussion of the means and objectivities of the market economy (Blokkeer 2014; Straume and Humphrey 2010).

Today's democratic politics seems to be trapped between technocracy and economic-scientific expertise, on the one hand (having a dominant focus on economic and technological progress), and populism, on the other, which aggressively articulates the need to recovery of a form of collective self-government and self-representation (Bickerton and Accetti 2021), but frequently does so in the name of specific economic interests (e.g., agriculture, the fossil fuel industry). The first, the technocratic tendency, has various affinities with a legal, controlled, and not very participatory approach to democracy (Tully 2008) and is based on ideas of “social engineering”, “scientific management”, and specialized knowledge (Mańko 2017; Frankenberg 2014). The technocratic tendency has been an integral part of post-war constitutional democracy and has become even more accentuated with the emergence of human rights, on the one hand, and neoliberalism, on the other (especially in the condition of the “dual” process of European integration, that is, the contemporary formation of the European Union and of the Council of Europe). The populist trend has emerged in more recent times, especially in the context of the 2007 financial and economic crisis, and articulates a specific interpretation of the political-democratic imaginary.

### **Counter-reactions and alternative imaginaries**

The liberal-democratic constellation of the post-war period – especially in its recalibrated or refocused form around law and universal human rights and in its globalized and interdependent manifestation – has provoked important counter-reactions. First of all, as has become particularly evident in the last decade, a right-wing populist reaction strongly contests the universalism and international interdependence aspect of liberal democracy and calls for a “return” to the sovereign national state. Second, a (radical) form of left-wing populism attacks the globalization of the economy and the sharp decrease in the public political space of national politics. Both of these phenomena significantly challenge institutionalized liberal democracy as being in stark contrast to the principles of popular sovereignty and social equality.

Populism can be understood as a phenomenon that includes the denial of the liberal-juridical imaginary that underlies liberal democracy and as a competitive force that seeks to redirect the meaning, justifications, and institutional realization of modern democracy. In this, populists frequently refer to constituent power, trying to change the constitutional structure of democracy, promoting in some cases a “counter-constitutionalism”, in which national and popular sovereignty and the



priority of majoritarian politics are the cornerstones, in contrast with internationalism, divided sovereignty, and legal priority in the liberal-judicial imagination.

Right-wing populism tends to promote a vision of democracy in which popular sovereignty, the homogeneous collectivity (the people), majoritarian rule, and forms of hierarchy are central. Right-wing populism rejects the perception of democracy in its constitutional-liberal, legal/norms-based, and technocratic version. Alternatively, many right-wing populists perceive democracy as an expression of a distinctive popular, national will (“the people”) and emphasize the constitution in its function of safeguarding national identity and domestic political sovereignty (Blokker 2019). The idea of a universal or European *rule of law*, as well as a European constitutional tradition, is contested, and a political system is proposed on the basis of strong leadership, direct representation of the majority, and alleged national traditions and historical identity.

Left-wing populism, generally of less political weight than right-wing populism in electoral terms but still an important political force, criticizes “post-democratic” democracy and liberal constitutionalism as vehicles of capital and multinational corporations. Left-wing populism predominantly targets the neoliberal and globalist character of both the economy and democratic organization. It does not necessarily reproduce the critique of legal universalism that we find in right-wing populism. Instead, it often promotes the idea of universal human rights in the name of protecting minorities and marginalized groups. In this sense, left-wing populists criticize a too-limited reading of “classical” rights (e.g., the right to private property) and propose a significant extension of socio-economic rights in the name of equality and redistribution. The criticism of the existing order of liberal democracy is the dominance of powerful and opulent elites and their neoliberal agenda. If popular sovereignty in right-wing populism is understood as a plebiscitarian basis for the populist leader’s politics (criticizing parliamentarism and proceduralism in liberal democracy), in left-wing populism, the emphasis is on direct and active participation from below, in a vision of the substantive nature of democracy. The leftwing version of populism seems to reinforce some aspects of the liberal-legal imaginary, while strongly contesting others (i.e., the globalist, capitalist dimension).

### **Democratic imaginaries and political culture**

A sociological approach to democratic imagination is significant for at least two reasons. First of all, a careful consideration of the imaginary dimension contributes decisively to the debate on the nature of the current crisis of democracy. Only through a careful study of what is imaginable and unimaginable in democracy (McAfee 2019) can we begin to perceive a possibly ongoing structural change in the imagination of democracy.<sup>3</sup> This process of change regards the friction and potential clash between instituted and instituting imaginaries. Second, if the dominant democratic imagination allows us to understand the existing order and act politically in its context, the radical imagination allows us to identify a different world, alternative to the current one (but obviously, not necessarily more democratic). A careful analysis of the democratic imagination, as a reflective-critical

way to deal with politics, can show us how to overcome the current political crisis and helps us imagine (and institutionalize) a different, more inclusive, and fairer democracy. This imagination is fundamental once we recognize that the challenge that comes from right-wing populism potentially leads to a transfiguration of democracy in a plebiscitarian and authoritarian direction (Urbinati 2014). Admittedly, the critique of “politicism”, as raised by Nancy Fraser, meaning to treat the “political order as self-determining” and “failing to problematize the larger societal matrix that generates its deformations”, needs to be recognized as pertinent (Fraser 2022: 115). At the same time, it is difficult to see how the conundrum of capitalism-cum-environmental destruction can be overcome without a recourse to democratic politics and the political, which needs as a starting point a radical re-imagination of (the relation between) politics and the economy.

This also means that a core task is to understand the nature of reactionary counterforces, including what is labeled populism. For a good part of political science, the phenomenon of populism consists of an assault on liberal democracy, and the latter is understood as the ideal political regime – or, as a minimum the lesser evil one – to be defended (and, therefore, the interest of “anti-populist” political-scientific analysis lies above all in the evaluation of the populist threat and in the identification of institutional ways to defend liberal democracy). In contrast, for the sociological-political approach that we follow here, populism cannot be purely taken as an irrational assault on a largely rational and functioning and functionalist system. Indeed, populism (and similar forms of political expression) must be studied as manifestations of criticism of fundamental dimensions of the political regime of liberal democracy. As such, analyzing populism can help us glimpse the fundamental conflicts and tensions in liberal democracy itself (see Alexander *et al.* 2020; Arato and Cohen 2021).

In this, liberal democracy is not understood as a mere set of procedures, norms, and institutions that must be strengthened to function (this appears to be a general position of “anti-populist” political scientists and legal scholars). Rather, the institutional dimension is in itself the expression of a series of social and political meanings that can only have a “grip” on reality if they correspond to expectations in society and if they are part of a political culture of the elite but also of the culture of society as a whole. In this sense, the political imagination that directs and shapes political culture provides basic “fictitious” – or rather, “imaginary” – political forms (significant examples are representation, constituent power, the majority, universal human rights, the public sphere, civil disobedience, and hierarchy) that make democratic politics visible and intelligible.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, we have tried to understand whether in contemporary times the basic political forms of liberal democracy are being contested in a potentially destabilizing way. A significant question for sociology of democracy is: how can we try to study a possible political-cultural change and a “shift” of the democratic imagination in a concrete or empirical way? It seems reasonable to define the

post-war democratic imaginary as a predominantly liberal imaginary (Rosanvallon 2009; as Castoriadis argued, “a liberal oligarchy”). An important challenge is therefore a systematic analysis of criticisms of the liberal-democratic imagination, but more difficult is trying to disentangle our perception (our political imagination) of democracy from that of liberalism (Isaac 2017; McAfee 2019).

The liberal political imagination emphasizes, as we saw above, an institutional, organized, and rational approach to politics. In this, the liberal imaginary, especially in its neoliberal form, downplays or even occludes the political role of civil society and citizens (McAfee 2019: 78). The people and individuals are represented as powerless against the elites and large institutions and businesses. Powerlessness manifests itself in societal political culture, understood as the way in which people perceive institutions and politics and their own role in politics, and the political, legal, and social tools available, and how institutions tend to respond to everyday problems (McAfee 2019: 80). In other words, political culture consists of habits and forms of political participation (McAfee 2019: 80). The political culture that corresponds to the liberal imagination tends to underestimate the role of the citizen and places emphasis on institutions and leaders (Blokke 2010). Additionally, liberal political culture tends to represent the political *status quo* as the only rational and defensible way for political organization. In this, the liberal imagination contributes to a reification of politics (as formal, professional, institutionalized politics) and tends to ignore or even marginalize less visible forms of politics and the political capacities of non-professional actors.

An analysis of the current crisis of democratic politics should start from a recognition of the *limits* of the liberal imagination, its historicity, and its internal tensions (Innes and Philp 2018; Rosanvallon 2009). These tensions include the two prominent trends discussed above: that of juridification and depoliticization and technocratization through the encroachment of economics into politics. The liberal imagination tends, in this, to perceive politics in a vertical way (rulers – governed) and political power as a form of control (McAfee 2019: 85). A critical sociological analysis should also include an explicit recognition of different democratic cultures, which include different forms of understanding politics and acting politically (from the more professional to the social, participatory one). Furthermore, the analysis of democratic political culture should recognize its tendency to manifest itself differently with regard to different social groups (elites, movements, citizens).

Sociological analysis at the empirical level should, therefore, include a careful study of the various forms of populist criticism, which include as critical objectives both the domination of legal norms and institutions and the hegemony of the globalized neoliberal economy. Empirical analysis of political cultures and political meanings prevalent in society helps us understand where liberal democracy produces heteronomy instead of individual and/or collective autonomy (see Alexander *et al.* 2020). However, critical analysis should not merely be limited to the identification of negative forces but should equally identify and analyze positive forces of radical and creative imagination, such as those manifested, for example, in democratic and progressive movements (including left-wing populists but also other less easily qualified political subjects, such as Rebellion Extinction, Fridays

for Future, Black Lives Matter, or local political phenomena). These movements often use human rights in their political demands but follow a different approach from political liberalism, invoking a radical, emancipatory imaginary.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The storming of Capitol Hill in January 2021 represented probably the most vociferous protest against the institutions of liberal democracy.
- 2 This chapter further develops ideas presented in some of my previous works, in particular Blokker 2017, 2019, and 2021.
- 3 It is not least worrisome that younger generations seem to move away from representative, parliamentary democracy, see Foa et al. (2020).
- 4 A dimension of human rights that seems less appreciated by Gauchet.

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# Concluding observations

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Drawing conclusions to the contributions in this volume appears a challenge for two reasons: first, because conclusions in themselves would not be objectively possible given the breadth and depth of the topics presented here; second, because each author has developed their arguments with such mastery and knowledge of their subject matter that little remains to be added by the editor of this volume.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some overall observations that emerge from a reading of the book, which we can consider as the nodal points that constitute the set of reflections that gradually take shape in the various chapters, sometimes with reciprocal cross-references, even if not always explicit.

A first observation concerns the structural changes that took place in societies between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium. Traditional social class affiliations, and hence the political groups that represented them, gradually lost their weight and salience in the construction of social and individual identities. This has produced an identity gap that has also reverberated on the sense of belonging to political forms, and thus also to democratic political institutions. In addition to this structural cause, so to speak, there is a no less important cultural one, which is connected to the first but which has evolved its own autonomy and its own capacity to directly affect the relationship between citizens and democracy. This is the process of individualisation. Originating well before the period of the crisis of belonging (in fact, it dates back at least to the Renaissance period, if not even earlier, to the founding of city-states in the Middle Ages), it produces its most visible effects today, however, in the crisis of confidence in democracy, as it projects the subject into an essentially private-personal dimension of their own existence, often perceived also in competition with others, which leads them to nurture disinterest, distrust and disidentification towards everything that concerns the shared sphere of participation and the public arena. Or, where some interest is registered, it takes more the form of a frustrated and angry judgement on politics and its actors, rather than a source of involvement and commitment.

We are therefore in the presence of a dog chasing its own tail. In advanced modern societies, the values of individualism form the core of an overall model in which individual freedoms and self-determination come to occupy the highest places in the hierarchical scale of the cultures in question. These values have helped build the democratic political forms we know.



Individualism, however, when it burns bridges with cultural models of belonging and identity to social groups, classes, styles and behaviours, tends at the same time to loosen identification with broader institutional entities, of which those groups and classes were intermediaries and bearers towards the individual. This triggers a mechanism of disqualification and loss of value and consideration, in general, towards the democratic method, its institutions and its actors. One of the main causes, though certainly not the only one, of the tendency towards the emergence of populisms lies in this precise condition, typical of today's times.

That said, this does not mean that this trend is destined to continue or that it must necessarily lead to a progressive decline of democracy. Max Weber's lesson about the future being open to indeterminacy was true at the time he wrote and still holds true today. What is needed, however, is for the two dimensions, the micro (the individual and his relations at the level of forms and life-worlds) and the macro (cultural models and related political systems), to enjoin again, now that those intermediate centres and their ideologies, which in the past ensured tight links, have disappeared.

To this end, the vitality that civil society, the eternal forge of innovation and change in modern societies, still shows today bodes well. In fact, it seems that the recovery of those spaces of belonging and identification that have disappeared with the traditional political conflict is taking place on a social rather than political level. After all, if one thinks about it, historically this has always been the case. It is always from the social level that those values and interests take shape and consolidate, to which then, as a second step, some political group or some political entrepreneur will give shape, voice and life force. Of course, those social forms often still appear at the level of very restricted, limited or fragmented contexts, unable to express a synthesis of an overall reading of the social vicissitude. However, as Ambrogio Santambrogio writes, "the inherent incoherence of the imaginary offers a much more open space for collective action than ideology". And after all, it would be unthinkable for 21st-century societies to be organised in models in which differences in vision, position and sensibility did not find sufficient space in as many social representations and imaginaries of the present and future.

In this set of new demands, in these driving forces that press directly from the level of society, we also find what Alain Touraine, in his latest work, calls 'ethical movements', which have the person in his dignity, hence the individual, at their centre. As Massimo Pendenza observes, Émile Durkheim had indeed foreseen everything perfectly when, already in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he spoke of a future in which we would see constantly changing rights, in the sense of a continuous demand for expansion, recognition and inclusion. Nevertheless, the constant and growing demand for social justice is today articulated through, certainly, an appeal to universalism, as it was yesterday, but a universalism that today, with respect to yesterday, places at the centre the particularity and *difference* of the person, before and even more than their equality, an equality that is not at all contested but simply taken for granted. This transition, which is understandable and inevitable in a process of progressive growth and representation of the dimension of the individual and the person in all of their expressions, is nevertheless showing today

that it has strayed so far from its historical origins (freedom, equality, brotherhood) as to risk losing awareness of the fact that, although already gained, those ancient rights can by no means be taken for granted and the daily risk of being denied or even falsified, counterfeited, or eroded remains, without the public, that is citizens, being genuinely and fully aware of it.

It also raises, also in this perspective, the question of the ability of today's liberal democracy to be able to produce forms and ways through which those differences of vision, those imaginaries, those sensibilities can find a way to express themselves, to coexist, and, not least, to arrive at options of governance able to maintain a synthesis and to be considered credible and reliable, starting with those groups of citizens who have long since ceased to vote. Paul Blokker observes that an analysis of the current crisis of democratic politics should begin with a recognition of the limitations of liberal imaginary, of its history and its internal tensions. In addressing this theme, Gaspare Nevola starts from a critique of the Schumpeterian-rooted model of competitive democracy, rightly asserting that when we speak of a crisis of democracy, we must not forget that we are also faced with a crisis of the 'theory' of democracy. The acritical acquisition of Schumpeterian theory often leads us to believe that modern and liberal democracy coincide with the 'Schumpeterian method' (competition between elites) and that this is therefore the only possible real democracy. Conversely, Nevola continues to argue that it is necessary to stress that democracy and its institutions are themselves processes and instruments of change in society and in the constituted order, indeed of 'self-transformation'.

Democracy, in other words, is error correction. Even of *one's own* mistakes. And therein probably lies its intrinsic strength compared to other types of political forms of governing society. Take, for example the issue of the level of political communication in contemporary democracies. Who could claim that this level today is compatible with adequate, comprehensive, quality information?

On such issues, which are more specific and no less relevant than those related to identity, political culture and the imaginary, it is more difficult to hypothesise that a bottom-up process of social construction or reconstruction of the common good 'political information' can take place, as mentioned above. Here, of necessity, the actors who directly play roles in this regard, both politicians and communicators, are called into question. From this point of view, Erica Antonini draws attention to some examples of good practices that should be cultivated and supported with regard to the above-mentioned actors. Practices such as being kind to those who are distant from one's positions or refraining from judgements or evaluations when there is insufficient evidence to express them.

More generally, as Fabio de Nardis observes, to safeguard democracy and to avoid regressive historical movements, it is necessary to maintain a steadfast recognition of social pluralism, that is of the different interests that are expressed in modern societies. It is therefore true that civil society continuously produces forms of adaptation and 'self-representation' vis-à-vis politics, but it is also true that this alone is not enough. Social and civic participation is not enough. What is also needed is *policy* that knows how to intervene, accompany and guide these processes, which, if not taken by the hand of political groups and leaderships, punctually trace the upward and downward path of a parabola.